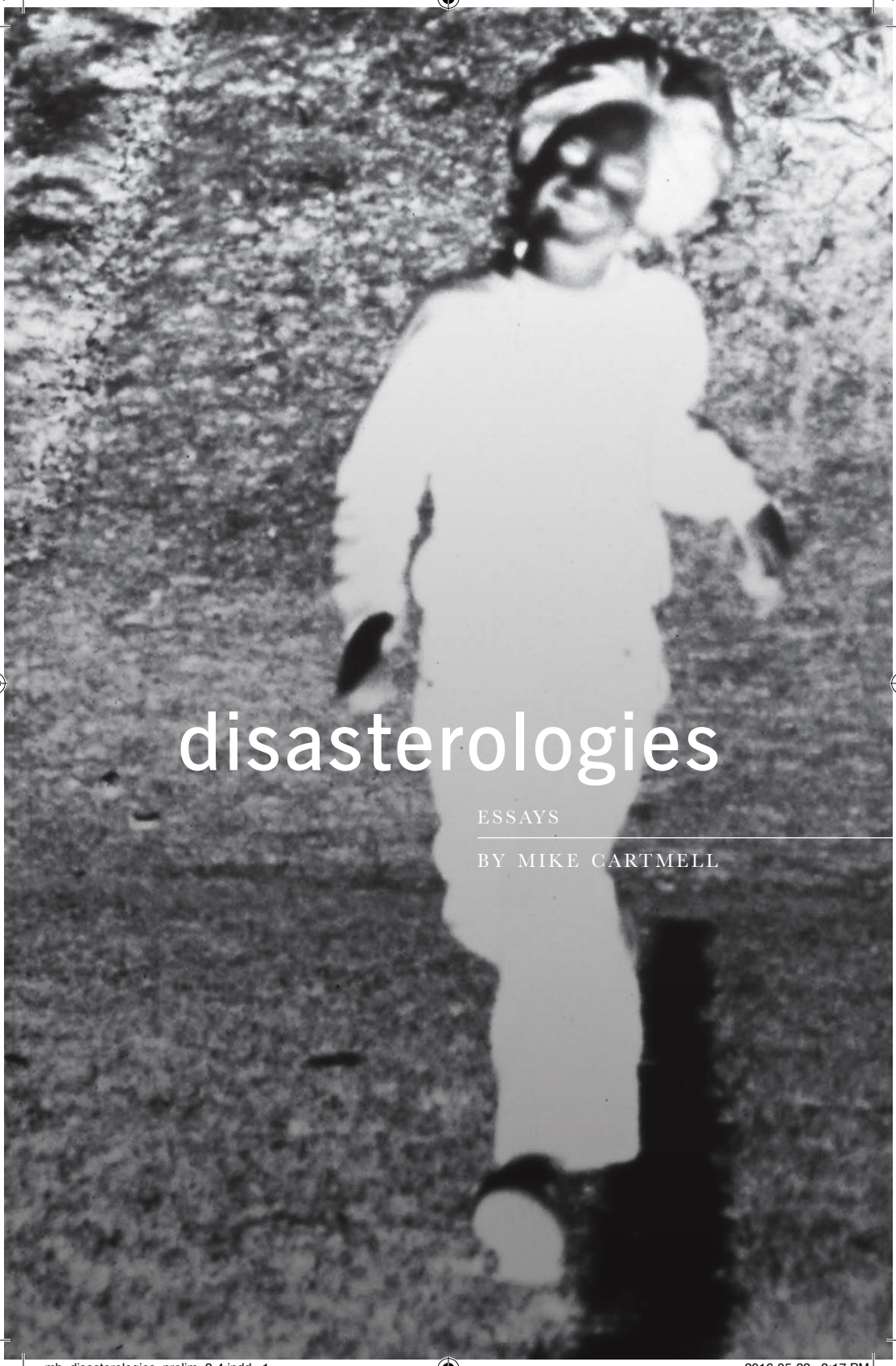
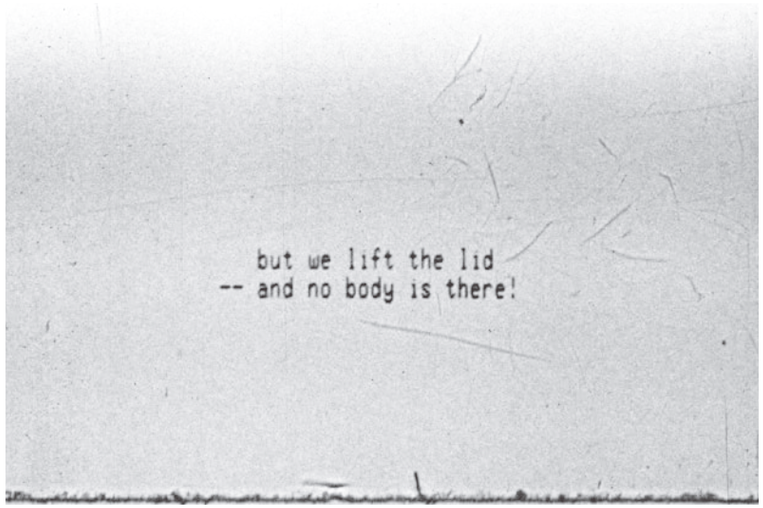


disasterologies

ESSAYS

BY MIKE CARTMELL

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 1 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 2-3 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



I have written a wicked book,

and feel as spotless as a lamb

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 4-5 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



In the fields with which we we are concerned,
knowledge comes only in flashes. The text is
the thunder rolling long afterward.

Walter Benjamin

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 6-7 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

There is so little to remember of anyone—
an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every
memory is turned over and over again, every word,
however chance, written on the heart in the hope
that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh,
and that the wanderers will find a way home, and
the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step
through the door finally and stroke our hair with
dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to
keep us waiting long.

***Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson**

Somehow in silence, I traveled home to here asleep,
trying to think, to pull what I'd once felt out of the
shadows. I had to make a leap into the not-yet-
conscious, into the truth and absolution of images
and sounds, toward the countenance of something
still nameless. The only means of doing so was to
find and found this thing. This nameless thing that
emerges, as I do, again and for the first time, into
the world, and will never leave it. This thing of
love's black sail. This foundered foundling thing.
This thing of you.

The gusts of wind were very hard and the night
very dark, but our little whaleboat glided away like
a thing of life.

***Ithaca* by Mike Cartmell, video, 2000**

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 8-9 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

disasterologies

ESSAYS

BY MIKE CARTMELL

THE CANADIAN FILM INSTITUTE

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 10-11 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

This publication is made possible with the generous assistance of:

Canada Council for the Arts

Canadian Film Institute / Institut canadien du film

ISBN: 0-919096-52-2

Published by Canadian Film Institute, 2016.
All rights reserved.

EDITOR: Mike Hoolboom

DESIGNER: Kilby Smith-McGregor

SERIES EDITOR: Tom McSorley

THANKS: *Sam Cartmell, Phil Hoffman, Sandy Kelley, Michael Nelson, Alan Zweig*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Mike Cartmell: Sharpening the Tools • ii
by Mike Hoolboom

ESSAYS

Bad Timing • 12
Orphanhoodedness • 13
Eat the Book • 15
Scène de naufrage: Reading *The Lover* with Blanchot • 20
Some Vocal Current Electric: Melville's Faith • 36
Landscape With Shipwreck • 52
Experience Torn to Shreds/Experiments From the Granary • 80
Stet • 88
I Come Here For The Rites Of Your Unworlding • 98
Flintmaker • 116

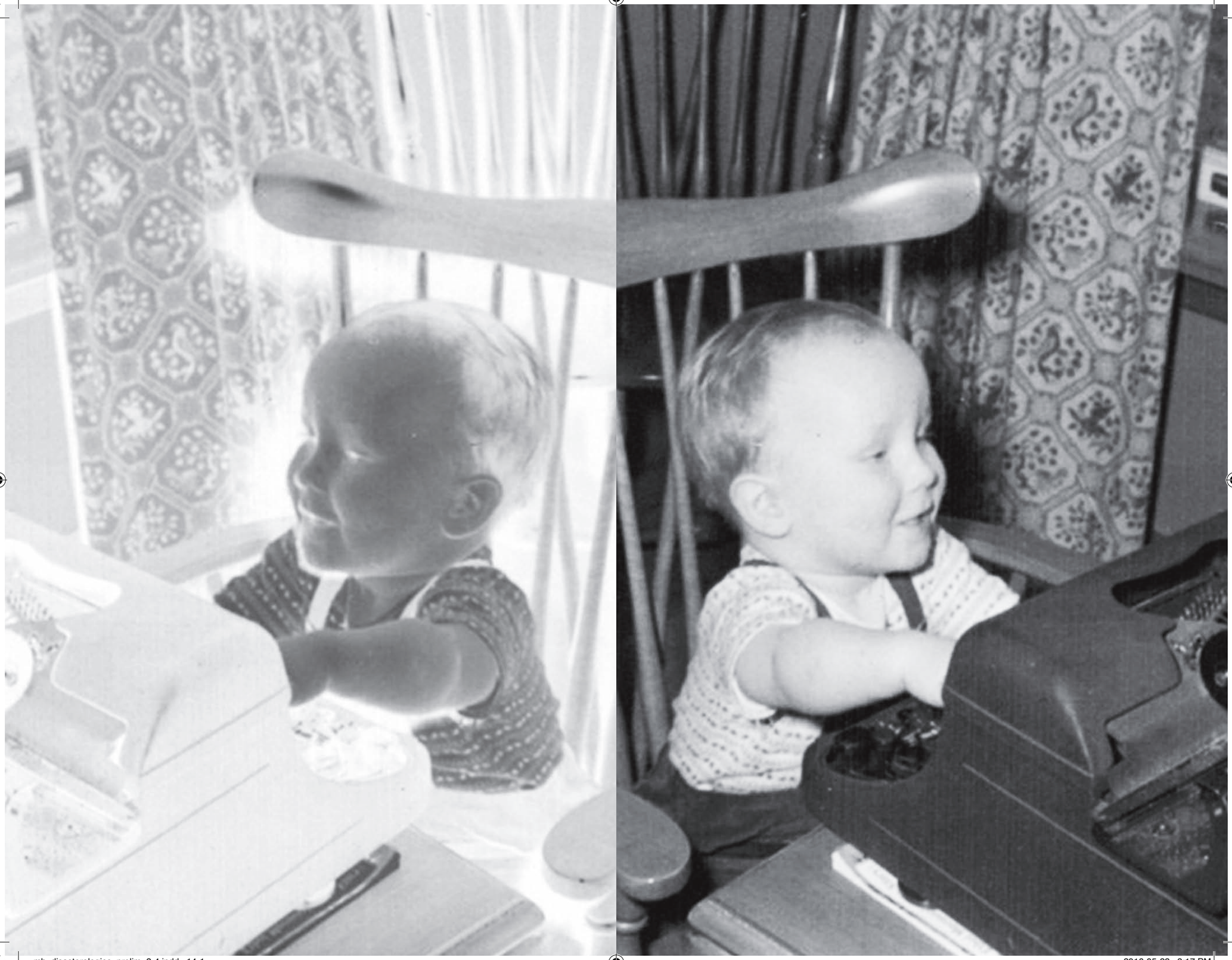
SCRIPTS

In the Form of the Letter "X" • 138
Ithaca • 140
Room • 143
O, Fortuna • 144
Vocables • 148

FILMS + VIDEOS, BIOGRAPHY

Films and Videos • 156
Bio • 158

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 12-13 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



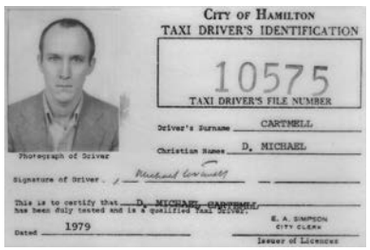
mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 14-1 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Mike Cartmell: Sharpening the Tools

MIKE HOOLBOOM

When I met him, Mike told me that after a hydrogen bomb named "Ivy Mike" dropped in 1952, "Mike" became the most popular first name in North America. I don't know if he'd ever been a Michael, but when we met he was the Mike bomb I secretly wanted to be, though eventually he'd shuck that skin and become Mick. A few years later I realized that Mike had picked up some of his naming riffs from Derrida (for some years in the 1980s Mike's theory dad), but he had a way of taking even the most unpronounceable tangents and making them oh so personal. For instance, he once told me, "The name is at the bottom of language itself. A language names you, you are named by your language." Who else would say this except for a foundling left on the hospital steps, someone who spent his whole life learning everything except his own name? The first feeling I ever got from him was: someone isn't there. Not just someone, but the someone who is the whole world. What do you do when the whole world isn't there, when you've lost your roots, your foundation?

When I meet up with his high school friends, steelworker comrades, or fellow complain-a-holics, they all say the same thing: Mike was the smartest person they ever met. How does the saying go? For better or worse. There didn't seem anything alive he couldn't learn, from fixing cars to playing slide guitar, from the four fundamentals of psychoanalysis to furniture building. He was the first person I knew to own a personal computer and was learning to code with it. When his car broke, he didn't have the cashola for the good mechanics; he assured me during


CITY OF HAMILTON
TAXI DRIVER'S IDENTIFICATION
10575
TAXI DRIVER'S FILE NUMBER
Driver's Surname CARTMELL
Christian Names D. MICHAEL
Photograph of Driver
Signature of Driver
This is to certify that D. MICHAEL CARTMELL has been duly tested and is a qualified TAXI DRIVER.
Dated 1979
E. A. SIMPSON
CITY CLERK
Issuer of Licences

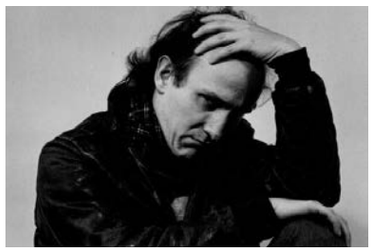


another marathon phone call from Ithaca that it was just a question of going through the manual and he would be able to fix it himself. He was going to make a movie called *How to Throw a Curveball* about how serious pitchers practise by throwing hammers because it helps them drop their wrists in the follow-through, a secret he shared in his first email handle: yhammer. If you looked closely, you could see great scrums of facts crowded together in his mouth. He never seemed to run out of them.

I think of Mike's intelligence as something large and mutant, like the X-Men who can't raise their voices above a whisper or they'll break every glass in the room. In the comic-book movies they go to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, but Mike went to Aldershot High School, like Jim Carrey, and this Mike here. He had his world turned upside down by David Creighton, the only experimental filmmaker in Burlington, a genius anti-teacher who hosted a course called the Unconscious that encouraged sixteen-year-olds in video experimentation and offered cut-and-paste readings that freely mixed lesbian separatists, pop lyrics, and Marxist class analysis. David was one of the first people who mattered to Mike, a friend for life as it turned out, one of the first who recognized the burden of his intelligence.

Being smarter than the average duck was hard to hold sometimes; Mike's intelligence could turn and devour him, puffing up the beginning of doubt into a mountain range of doomed certainties. Here is Mike's typically perverse and insightful take on enjoyment:

> Enjoyment is difficult and dangerous and not necessarily pleasant. There's a lot of enjoyment in torturing yourself with your mean spirited self judgments. There must be, otherwise we couldn't keep doing it… The repeating steps that cause anguish





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 2-3 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

> or pain or grief, why do you keep doing it? There must be something in it… Some enjoyment.

He wanted to write, but writing tortured him. The words trickled out of him like a death rattle. Was it the commitment, the act of faith required that plagued him, or the feeling that whatever he wrote would never be good enough to make up for the lost years, the books he hadn't already published? When you met up with him, the words poured out, the Irish lilting words, the quotatoes from Joyce, the literary gossip and risotto recipes, declaimed at high volumes across rooms large and small. You'd walk away and wonder, Why don't I have a shelf filled with this guy's books? He said to me, "Every moment of culture is the setting in place of memorials and monuments." Was it the burden of this responsibility that made writing impossible, the task of having to face up to the promise of his genius, the requirement of being at least perfect as he faced the blank page with his small, fastidious, almost fussy handwriting, still bearing the mark of some long ago penmanship class?

What he published and wrote about, in the end, was his friends. Perhaps it was a bargain struck with the overlord, the keeper of the words. Perhaps he said to the god who guarded his prison cell that these words don't really count, they're just for my pals, so you can let them through the dreaded gates. He wrote about Vincent Grenier, and Phil Hoffman in strange texts filled with voices that whispered and creaked and howled. All of his friends knew him as an accomplished mimic. Voices inhabited him, and he laid them out in some of his few published works. It wasn't novels that he managed in the end, or travelogues or cookbooks even; instead, he reinvented the art of the essay by taking up the cause of small movies and friendship.





Mike often introduced himself as a filmmaker whose films nobody ever sees. He had a habit of promising movies that never quite met the deadline, a word he told me was invented in the American Civil War when Confederate troops were captured en masse, too quickly for the Union soldiers to put up walls. Their captors would draw imaginary lines on the ground, and if the prisoners crossed them they would be shot. Deadlines. Mike didn't seem to mind the crossing, though. Most of the movies he finished were almost never shown; they are not only personal but private films. At this moment when everyone has become their own publisher, with our social media rush for exposure, he was determined to keep a secret; even the works that exist in the public record are filled with secrets, inviting the patient reader or viewer to spend the time to walk through his labyrinths, searching for clues. Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake* motored in part by the dream that someone would spend their entire life reading it. Does that seem a curious ambition? Does it seem curiouser that Mike might have shared it, even a little?

Among the movies he didn't want to show are three nearly feature-length films made in the noughts, the first about genius American poet Susan Howe, who Mike was convinced was the love child of Samuel Beckett and a woman whose name I can't recall. The second and third comprise serial shorts collected under the title *Shipwreck Theory*. When his second marriage ended, suddenly and unexpectedly, and he was dispatched from Mobile, he pronounced himself "shipwrecked"; in Mike's words: "It was experienced as disaster in the etymological sense. . . One is separated from the star that ought to guide one. One has problems navigating. One finds oneself up against a rocky shoal and the next thing you know you're in the drink." The blend of personal mythology and up-to-the-minute theory was typical of Mike's riffing, which he performed even more ably after considerable imbibing of fine and not-so-fine wines on an island squat he named "the camp." On his unusual CV, which





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 4-5 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

he submitted to me with all the hush-hush caution of someone passing state secrets, his movie work is divided into four sections: 1. *Juvenalia*, 2. *Unreleased Movies*, 3. *Not Available for Screening*, and 4. *At a Standstill but Not Without Hope*.

He talked to me compulsively about the movies he was going to make. His descriptions would be so vivid, so terrifying, so strange, you felt that you were actually seeing the movie as it rolled out of his mouth, like when he described the sex film he never made:

> Couldn't I make a sex scene that was actually like sex, that would have the horror, the intimacy, the ecstasy, and the grief that real sex has? Instead of being a show, which is what all sex is in cinema—either an appeal to voyeurism, or a deconstruction of voyeurism. Neither of those has anything to do with actually doing sex. Watching sex is another activity as far as I'm concerned, and one of my most enjoyed ones. But it's different. It appeals to different parts of the libido, zones of gratification. I can imagine living without doing sex. I can't imagine living without watching it.

Listening to him you got the sense that, having delivered the words, he'd lost his urgency, let some air out of the idea.

I think every artist has two families. In Mike's case, as an orphan foundling, there were at least three: the mysterious family that went missing, the one that raised him, and then another family of friends and lovers and artists. And in this last family he became for me a kind of father. He was forever urging me to read *Moby-Dick*—did we ever have a conversation that he didn't at least mention Melville? Melville was his father; as someone who was adopted, he felt entitled to adopt right back.





"Mel-ville"—which means a meeting place of villages, an intersection, an X—was the same as "Cart-mell"—a meeting place of carts, a village in other words, an intersection, an X. Or as Mike put it, via his Melville dad: "the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones."

He was always telling me what movies I should see, ones that contained moments of what he called "unwatchability," which was the highest good as far as Mike was concerned. The most important things to see were the things you couldn't bear to watch. And this shared heritage, the Melville books and Godard movies and Coltrane records that he wanted us all to read or see or hear, was not designed to create a uniform culture so that we could all laugh at the same jokes; instead, he hoped it would bring us to our differences. The way we would come together was not to nod in time to the same beat but to express our singularity, each in our own way, like the jazz bands he loved. Here was a different idea of the father, not the one who imposes the rule of law that needs to be followed but one who insists that you find your own style, your own understanding. As Mike put it:

> All art begins with imitation. . . . But at a certain point, someone has to invent rather than just copy. You've been making pound cake. Then you start to make another kind of cake. But pretty soon you're going to have to make *coq au vin*. And you won't have a recipe to do it. You have to invent.

And after he made me read Melville and Shakespeare and Joyce and Vollman and Duras, he held out the one, the central tome, the most pitch-perfect and necessary and central book in the central library. Needless to say, it was about baseball. It was a giant book filled with numbers, and he assured me it was crucial to my development as a human being. It was a kind of sports ephemeris, a stat geek's wet dream.





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 6-7 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Literature's holy grail had batting averages and on-base percentages. I tried to get interested in baseball but rarely made it to the seventh-inning stretch.

Mike was a powerful reader. Everyone has a personal desert island list of great writers, the ones they can't do without, but who has a list of great readers? Mike was one of the world's great readers. He took on books the way others take on new best friends: there was a mix of joy and responsibility—let's not take this lightly. Some of his best friends, his most cherished company, were books. And how he loved to quote them, from memory, having abandoned the high school theatre's limelight for the smaller stages of dinner table, kitchen counter, or the front seat of a car.

In our last conversation, he spoke in a graveyard hush of a voice, exhausted. He was just so tired, he said "I want to sleep for a while, and when I'm done sleeping I'm going to go back to sharpening my tools." Sharpening his tools was one of his final projects, raised as usual to a slightly larger than life, mythical status, laid out in the plain and complicated language he enjoyed, which acted as a kind of drop cloth for the subterranean life of his secret hope: to change the world with a single sentence. There's a modesty in this declaration of intent, a humble and respectful aspect. It was not for him the announcement of a heroic undertaking, but his words ring with keenness of attention, a commitment to readiness. Let me be ready. The end is near. Let's sharpen the tools and be ready.

Mike "Mick" Cartmell,
June 29, 1952–February 5, 2014







mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 8-9 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



ESSAYS

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 10-11 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Bad Timing

Near the middle of Chris Marker's film *La Jetée*, the man "whose story this is" and the woman whose image obsess him pause in front of a cross-section of a sequoia covered with historical dates. "She utters a foreign name that he does not understand. As in a dream, he points to a spot beyond the tree. He hears himself say: 'I come from there' and falls back exhausted."[1] In the published text of the film, Marker adds a footnote clarifying this "*nom étranger*." It reads simply: Hitchcock.[2] The scene alludes, of course, to one in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in which Madelaine and Scotty confront a similar object. Scotty supplies the botanical name of "the oldest living things," *sequoia sempervirons*, which he translates as "always green, ever living." Madelaine, who seems a virtual somnambulist throughout this sequence, asserts her dislike for the trees, and when Scotty asks her why she responds: "Knowing I have to die." As in a dream, she points to a spot within the cross-cut of the tree and says: "Somewhere in here I was born. And there I died. It was only a moment for you. You took no notice."

1 I am translating the text given in the screenplay published in L'Avant-Scene Cinéma, No. 38, 15 juin 1964, pp. 23-30, which reads as follows: Elle prononce un nom étranger qu'il ne comprend pas. Comme en rève, il lui montre un point hors de l'arbre. Il s'entend dire "Je viens de la…" et y retombe, à bout de forces.

2 Ibid.

Orphanhoodedness

1. Etymology

My first words will be of the last word in the book. (The last word, that is, but one, as Susan Howe has pointed out: the speculative connection she draws between FINIS and the work of James Joyce is something I'll be mentioning later.) So, "orphan" will be my starting place (as it was in that first spinning place), my point of departure, the origin of (the errancy of) my text.

Orphan can be traced back to the Indo-European rootword orbh meaning to put asunder, to separate. Arising from this root is the Sanskrit orbho from which come Gk. orphanos and L. orphanus, which mean bereft of parents or father; but orbho also has the sense of deprived of free status. Through the rootword, orphan maintains a direct connection to Oslav. orbu, from which derive the contemporary Czech, Polish and Russian words rabu (slave), rabota (servitude, drudgery, compulsory labor, graduate school) and the familiar robot.

So, a number of themes are engaged here: separation in many senses—from parents, of America from England, Europe, the mother language (cf. *Mosses*), from one another, the disintegration of the promise of community and the problem of competitive free agency under emerging industrial capitalism (the limit expression of which Melville supplies in *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*); the connection, through its L. root between separation and the questions of engenderment and (self-) procurement (it is Lacan who points this out in section 16 of *Seminar XI*, a chapter which seems to me potently suggestive for any reading of





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 12-13 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

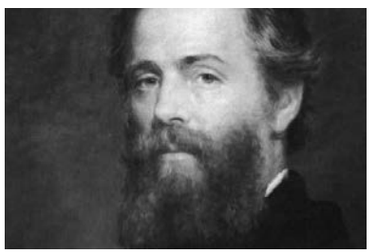
Moby-Dick, dealing as it does with alienation, the disposition of the drives upon the body, tattooing, the question of interpretation, and separation); the separation from place of origin as unsettledness (the unsettled science of cetology, landlessness as the residence of highest truth) and the question of settling of accounts (narrative, capitalist); and finally, servitude, the condition of work in the capitalist machine on land or at sea, the problem of the slavish shore, and of course, slavery itself.

I would only pause now to stress that this condition of orphanhoodedness – that's what I'm calling it—is always and everywhere predicated on some primordial original loss (of derivation, of origin, of place, or freedom) and the questions to be addressed are: what is the experience of this loss, how is it experienced, what is the relation of the subject to loss and the lost object? Provisionally, I'll say that loss involves the subject in a point of trauma, that loss engages the affects of guilt and grief and the process of mourning, and that both the trauma and the lost object are encrypted (vaulted, we could say, since we're doing etymology), secret, hidden (and this is where the "hoodedness" comes in, about which I'll have more to say later; for now, I just ask you to keep in mind what you already know about the etymology of whale, and adding, because I don't think it's been pointed out yet, that through the L. cognates for vault, vaulting, rolling etcetera we are led to the word vulva.)

2. Extracts (Unfinished)

...





Eat the Book

1992

In keeping with the theme of the conference (not to mention the proposal I submitted to it in the first place), I'll be talking about the psychoanalysis of consumption: the oral drive, its aims and objects; the verb "to eat," which Lacan calls "the most radical of verbs in the development of the phases of the drive;" and, as indicated in my title, some peculiar scenes involving what our program booklet might call "comestibles and potation." However, as I thought about, and wrote about these topics, I began to find that something besides the psychoanalysis of consumption was eating me, namely the consumption of psychoanalysis and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular. I mean the dissemination of Lacan in the academy (in our teaching, in presentations like this one, or others in which we hear our colleagues or, God forbid, ourselves asserting that the actions of the Shining Path, or the hole in the ozone layer, are answers from the real, amid polite perplexed applause in some conference room in the Royal York Hotel); I mean the construction of a Lacanian orthodoxy (possibly an oxymoron); or the well-known battles over the publication and the establishment of the texts of the seminars; and finally, the possible uses to which what Lacan called his teaching might be put.

I've also wondered about the sense in which the approach to his work can consume us, render us consumptive as we rheumily hack and spit our way to some form of understanding of a concept or passage only to have it ruined by some seeming contradiction rearing its ugly head on the very next page we read. This sounds bad I know. But I hope my talk today will, like the drive itself, skirl out one way and back the other, and that I'll wind up saying something suggestive about how we might swallow Lacan.

Like any good heretic on the run from the soutanes or mitzvahs or snake-handlings of his childhood (in my case it was the Reverend Mr. Black, who compensated for his diminutive stature with a furious discourse about lakes of fire delivered in a clattering Glaswegian brogue pitched an octave or two above the tenor register), I can't resist the occasional irreligious parodic gesture (and, of course, thereby revealing, both by my

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 14-15 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

flight and my blasphemous urge, the enduring and plangent tonalities of the theological within me precisely where I seek to erase them). Nevertheless, I won't cede my desire this time, and I'll begin with a lesson, a lecture in the proper sense, that is, a reading from scripture.

> *Revelation*, Chapter 10, 8-11.
> 8. And the voice which I heard from heaven spake unto me again, and said, Go *and* take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth.
> 9. And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take *it*, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.
> 10. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey; and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter.
> 11. And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings.

In the Ethics Seminar, Lacan refers to this text with just the three words "eat the book." He mentions it during a discussion of sublimation as the satisfaction of a drive without repression. He goes on to say that this

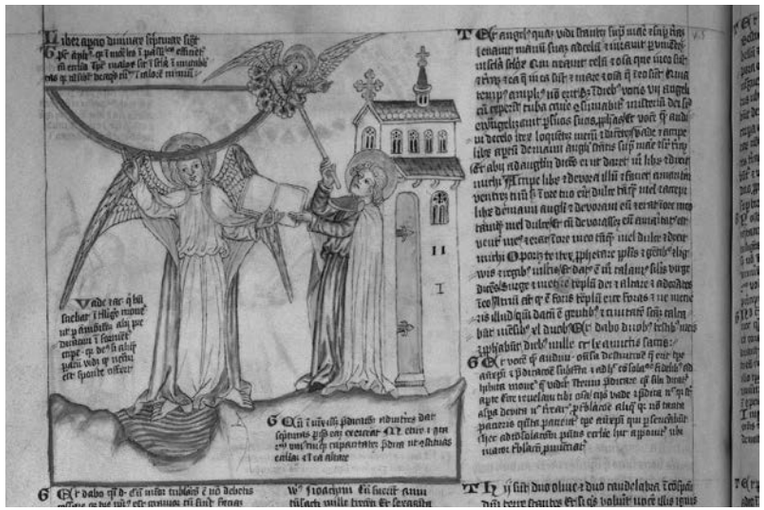


image is about the incorporation of the signifier itself, and let's take him literally when he says "incorporation:" the signifier, the word become flesh. Now isn't that a traditional Christian image? The word become flesh is God, is Christ, and that is what Lacan says in the next sentence.

Let me back up a moment and say that when Lacan refers to something in his usual oblique manner, it's a good idea to check the source; that's why I gave you the lesson. So let's look at it: "it was in my mouth sweet as honey:" that's the satisfaction of the drive. The enjoyment is not in getting something to eat, the drive is not an instinct, it's not a question of the satisfaction of a biological need. It's a question of the pleasure of the mouth, yum, yum, honey, but it's "as honey," not honey proper; the sweetness, the enjoyment of the mouth really comes from munching on the word, on God. And then: "but as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter." The word "belly" might put us in mind of a speech from the belly, that is, "ventriloquism," a speech that seems to come from other than where I am. Are we talking about the discourse of the unconscious? Here's Lacan in *Seminar XI*: "Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks the unconscious." The bitterness of the book in the belly is the constitutive fault in the subject riven by language, by the cut of the signifier.

According to Lacan's formulation in "The Subversion of the Subject," castration (the ascension of the human infant to the order of speech, to the Symbolic) is enacted by the cut of the signifier (an immemorial and radically particular act of speech, metaphorized in the "*nom du père*"—the Father's name, or the Father's no) which evacuates enjoyment from the body. But the evacuation is necessarily incomplete; a residue remains, disposed in a singular way on the body of each singular subject, and it is around these residual pockets of enjoyment that the drives emerge. "The *Trieb*," says Lacan, "implies in itself the advent of the signifier."

And what does the angel say? "Thou must prophesy." It's a maxim, a duty. You must speak to peoples, nations, tongues and kings the truth that resides bitter in your belly, even though that speech from the belly comes from other than where you take yourself to be, and even though you may not know what you are saying. At this point I might as well make a Zizekian gesture and "risk the thesis" that this image of "eating the book" suggests at least the possibility of an ethic of the drive.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 16-17 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

But, to get back to Lacan's account in the Ethics seminar, that's not, it would seem, what he's talking about. Next paragraph: "In daring to formulate a satisfaction that isn't rewarded with a repression, the theme that is central or preeminent is, What is desire?" Now, sublimation (satisfaction of the drive without repression) is a "*Triebschiksal*," an adventure, a vicissitude of the drive, but the central question at stake for Lacan is, "What is desire?" Lacan goes on to say that in every satisfaction of a need—like hunger—demand, in its status as "lynchpin" of the drive, and because it articulates itself through the signifier (remember, it's as a result of the cut of the signifier that it's there in the first place), demand always under- or over-shoots itself, and insists on something else. Whatever satisfaction is formulated "spreads out and conforms to that gap," that is, the gap between what would satisfy the need (eating a donut, let's say, preferably with oat bran) and what would satisfy the drive without repression (eating the book).

What supports this metonymy, says Lacan, this displacement which is subjected upon a drive, is desire. So now we have desire and the drive (which is always fundamentally the death drive) together, though they are often held to be radically distinct, mutually antagonistic. The drive is taken to be relentless activity, an intractable destructive quest for pure enjoyment, against which the subject must defend at all costs its desire. (One of Zizek's exemplary figurations of the drive is the Terminator, virtually unstoppable, even beyond its own destruction, in its pursuit of Sarah Conner.) In violating the maxim of the ethic of psychoanalysis, "don't cede your desire," you wind up, it is said, succumbing to destruction in the drive. But, to carry on with Lacan's account of "eating the book," he says that the realization of one's desire is possible only in the end, from the point of view of the last judgment, or apocalypse. "It is the trespassing of death on life that gives its dynamism to any question that attempts to find a formulation for the subject of the realization of desire… How can man, that is to say a living being, have access to knowledge of the death instinct (*sic*), to his own relationship with death? The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form." (And it is the drive that Lacan calls "the treasure of the signifier." And: "It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact [i.e. the death drive] that he may disappear from the chain of what he is.")

A couple of weeks later, in concluding his seminar, Lacan comes back to the image of eating the book. There is a price to pay for the operation of sublimation: you have to pay for this mystical operation with a pound of flesh called *jouissance*. This object, this good, which is sacrificed for desire—"and you will note" he says, "that that means the same thing as that desire which is lost for the good"—is precisely what religion seeks to recuperate. Religion at its best, I would say, and my sense is that for Lacan religion at its best resides in the sublimatory procedures of people like John of Patmos, "mystics," to give them their proper name, who in their speech and writing provide powerful images like the scene of "eating the book," and point to the laws of heaven. For Lacan, "the laws of heaven in question are the laws of desire," and they are the ones about which we are most profoundly ignorant since they are not the laws of the phallus.

"Of him who ate the book and the mystery within it, one can, in effect, ask the question: Is he good, or is he bad? That question now seems unimportant. The important thing is not knowing whether man is good or bad in the beginning; the important thing is what will transpire once the book has been eaten."

…



mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 18-19 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Scène de naufrage: Reading *The Lover* with Blanchot

1992

> *The fragment is neither a determined style nor a Failure, but the form of that which is written.*
>
> Derrida

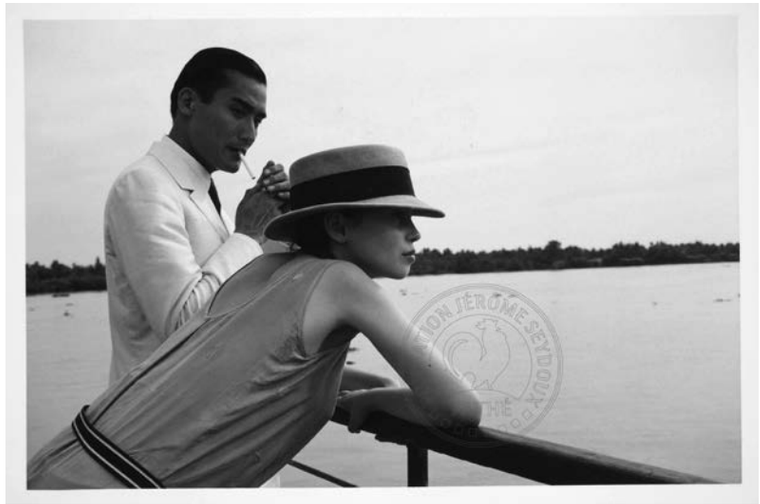
> *The gap makes becoming possible.*
>
> Blanchot

The Lover opens with a shipwrecked face. Begin there.

The narrator of *The Lover* has a face that is "ravaged." She says: "I have a face laid waste."[1] She was said to have once been beautiful, but even in her youth, in the time of the story, the devastation of her face was "foretold" by the face of "the little white girl": "that flagrant, exhausted face, those rings around the eyes, in advance of time and experience."(9) We might imagine the face, in keeping with the ideological convention still persistent in our culture, as the visible seat of the soul, of the individual subject possessed of autonomy, continuity and self-conscious clarity whose experience the Novel, in its classic development, inscribes. But this ravaged face, this face in ruins in Duras' text signals a selfhood, a subjectivity rather different than the confident Cartesian rationalist self. This disastrous face bespeaks a subject whose experience is torn to shreds[2], a disaster impossible to represent because:

> The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one. (8)

My interest here in this shredded experience—experience being understood, following Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's suggestion, as a perilous



or risky crossing[3]—and the fragmentary writing it produces to tell its non-existent story in (can we still call it a novel?) *The Lover*. The text, like the room in which the little white girl encounters otherness, sexuality and death in the person of the lover, is "a place of distress, shipwrecked."(44) This expression (in the original French it's "C'est un lieu de détresse, naufrage"[4]) needs some unpacking. The first part of *naufrage* (shipwreck) derives from a proto-Indo-European word meaning boat, from which we get English nautical and naval terminology: more interestingly from my point of view, this root word also means death, exhaustion, distress and necessity, and is the origin for a number of northern European words for things like corpse, need and boredom.[5] As I hope to indicate in this discussion, the shipwrecked text is one that is foundered and fragmented; exhausted and distressed; cast out, destitute, dispossessed. And it is also a text of difficult mourning, one which must grapple with the question (German: *Frage* – question; *fragen* – to ask, to question) of what is left after the vessel is sunk, the question of remains, that "swarming unaware blasphemous stuff that lacks the grace, decency and fidelity to follow value off the stage, to leave a respectable zero."[6]

Shipwreck is the disaster *par excellence*, lacking what Maurice Blanchot calls "the ruinous purity of destruction"[7] which would eliminate any

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 20-21 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

remainder. Blanchot enhances the nautical aspect of disaster by suggesting that it might mean "being separated from the star…, the decline which characterizes disorientation when the link with fortune from on high is cut."(WD2)[8] In other words, disaster is the result of being unable to navigate during a risky crossing, being alienated from or incomprehending of the bleak intractable otherness of Nature, that "excessiveness of uncodifiable law… to which we are destined without being party to it." (WD2) Part of the repellant necessity of Nature's law is that fragmented residue around which we must, but cannot, navigate. For a writer like Duras, in the late 20th century after "all the foundations of the earth are shaken," it is precisely the case that

> To write is no longer to situate death in the future—the death which is always already past; to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it. To write is to know that death has taken place even though it has not been experienced, and to recognize it in the forgetfulness that it leaves. (WD66)

To write shipwrecked, as Duras does, in a place of distress, is to take up a relation with a mute, stark and intractable otherness as remains, as a bloated corpse bobbing listlessly on the blank surface of "the sea, formless, simply beyond compare"(38), and to inscribe the non-existent story of its risky crossing. We might have to say, following Blanchot, that both the story and the inscription have always already endured the consequences of that risk; and that "the Other is death already." (WD19)

The narrative of *The Lover* begins with the image of a crossing, "the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognize myself, in which I delight (*je m'enchante*)"(3-4):









> So, I'm fifteen and a half.
> It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong River.
> The image lasts all the way across. (5)

This is the image that impels the narrative of the narrator's experience, beginning with this rather sketchy version and becoming increasingly detailed as the text progresses. In it, the little white girl enters the social field, the realm of otherness, which is construed as a field of vision. "Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes."(13) The nature of the image—enchanting and cherished, partial, circumscribed and fixed; cryptic—confers its qualities upon the social field itself. Although existing only in the narrator's mind—"I often think of the image only I can see now"(3)—the image is treated (albeit contradictorily) as if it were a photograph:

> …the image became detached, removed from all the rest. It might have existed, a photograph might have been taken… But it wasn't. The subject was too slight. Who would have thought of such a thing? The photograph could only have been taken if someone could have known in advance how important it was to be in my life, that event, that crossing of the river. But while it was happening, no one even knew of its existence. Except God. And that's why—it couldn't have been otherwise—the image doesn't exist. It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was detached or removed from all the rest. (10)

Despite the contradictory assertions (the image is detached like a photograph, but not detached because there was no photographer), for the narrator the remembered image is like a photo: it is fundamentally visual, singular (it "lasts all the way across"), and static. The connection

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 22-23 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

implied here between photography and memory is important, and worth examining in detail.

A photograph fixes a person and/or event as present, and this (artificial) presence affords whomever looks at the image the possibility of revelation.[9] In his book on photography, Roland Barthes writes:

> …in Photography I can never deny that *the thing* has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography.[10]

The photograph *is* presence: the reality and presence of what it depicts is never in question for the viewer. It can be scrutinized, interrogated, minutely examined. In short, it can be *read*: and read relentlessly as a faithful and authentic document of the real which can only reveal the truth. But inasmuch as the photographic presence is the presence of what is past, photography for Barthes opens up the question of absence as well, and in doing so conjures an image "which produces Death while trying to preserve life."[11] The presence of the real in the photograph is effaced by "this uncertain death, always anterior—this vestige of a past that has never been present." (WD66)

Barthes claims that a powerful photograph produces a "punctum," a sting or prick of memory which captivates us, lures us toward it, toward the forgotten memory of the past that we struggle to reconstitute. Our ordinary use of photography has a relation to memory as well. Most of us carry around photos of loved ones in our wallets or purses, or keep them in albums at home. These images function both as substitutes for the absence (or pastness) of whom or whatever is depicted, and as charms which somehow contain the very being of the absent person, object or experience. Photographs are, in these ways, fetishes. They stand in the place of a lack or absence, they maintain a presence as physical objects, and they have a magical or mystical power to enchant (*je m'enchante*) which relates somehow to questions of life and death. Photographs are permanent (rendered so by a chemical "fixer"), precious (the image is formed by halides of silver, gold or platinum), give only a partial aspect of the "scene," are marshaled by the frameline (the French call this mise en cadre), and are cryptic in both senses of the word: hard to decipher

("is that really you?") and a place of safekeeping for the dead, for their remains.[12]

Photography is "writing with light," and its qualities are passed on to writing itself in this fragment concerning the mother's photograph:

> When she was old, too, grey-haired, she went to the photographer's alone, and had her photograph taken in her best dark-red dress… The better-off natives used to go to the photographer's too, just once in their lives, when they saw death was near. Their photos were large, all the same size, hung in handsome gilt frames near the altars to their ancestors. All these photographs of different people… gave practically identical results, the resemblance was stunning… All the faces were prepared in the same way to confront eternity, all toned down, all uniformly rejuvenated. This was what people wanted… And they all wore an expression I'd still recognize anywhere. My mother's expression in the photograph with the red dress was the same. Noble, some would say. Others would call it withdrawn. (96-97)

Death; permanence ("to confront eternity"); fixity ("prepared in the same way", same expression); preciousness (gilt frame); charm, mystical power (red dress, "rejuvenated"); partiality (the face, a portrait); cryptic (noble/withdrawn): all written here, albeit lucidly, without light. The written fragment is a photograph not taken of a photograph (not taken?): its secretion of death and fetishism on her is photographic, is a writing of light.

The Lover is the story of a childhood spent "in too strong a sun"(6), a story the narrator has told before, but only writing "of clear periods, those on which the light fell." (8) Now she can write of what has been buried, she will make the truth of the story emerge from under "that black veil over the light" (7) through the revelatory power of an image, a photograph not taken on the ferry over the Mekong, within which circulates (for the purpose of errant navigation?) a constellation of looks:

> Inside the limousine there's a very elegant man looking at me. He's not a white man… He's looking at me. I'm used to people looking at me. People do look at white women in the colonies;

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 24-25 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





> at twelve-year-old white girls too. For the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets… (17)

The little white girl, the one who is looked at by the elegant man, looks at those who look at her, looks at herself looking, like the white colonial women in their white villas: "they look at themselves. In the shade of their villas, they look at themselves for later on." (19) We find the coincidence of vision (or lack of it) and sexuality (implied when the men regard the girl, and when the women look at themselves "for later on") in the important account of sexual initiation (keeping in mind that it's not clear here who "he" is):

> He's torn off the dress, he throws it down. He's torn off her little white cotton panties and carries her over like that, naked, to the bed. And there he *turns away* and wept. And she, slow, patient, draws him to her and starts to undress him. *With her eyes shut.* Slowly. (38, my emphasis)

The notion that "already, on the ferry, in advance, the image owed something to this moment" (39) suggests that "he" is somebody other than the Chinese man in the black car.

The articulation of gaze, vision and image that persists throughout the text coalesces on the effaced, ravaged surface of the durable face, "the face that comes from the absolutely far away and bears the mark of distantness, the trace of eternity, of the immemorial past." (WD23) The face of the self as otherness, the "flagrant, exhausted" face of the little white girl, the "I" or "she" whose story this is.[13] Everything is brought out, in bits, into the light, and everything made visible in this writing lucid with absence, loss, destitution, with death. The young assistant administrator from Savanna Khet:

> It was as night ended that he killed himself, in the main square, glittering with light. She was dancing. Then daylight came, skirted the body. Then, with time, the sunlight blurred its shape. (91)

Or the description of the "family of stone":

> Every day we try to kill one another, to kill. Not only do we not talk to one another, we don't even look at one another. When you're being looked at you can't look. To look is to feel curious, to be interested, to lower yourself. No one you look at is worth it. Looking is always demeaning. (54)

So the light and the book are bound up with sexuality and death, and with the relations of otherness that exist between the girl and those who look at her, who face her face: racial otherness, gender difference and in the case of the Chinese man, class distinction.

Otherness is the condition of sexuality, and the intimacy sexuality allows is finally dispersed and general, not private:

> Our first confidants, though the word seems excessive, are our lovers, the people we meet away from our various homes, first in the streets of Saigon and then on ocean liners and trains, and then all over the place. (60)

Sexuality, otherness, can be found on journeys then, on perilous sea voyages, on risky ferry crossings over the Mekong, of which no photographs exist. In addition to the relation to experience mentioned above, crossing the river, crossing over, suggests the passage over to death, crossing the River Styx into Hades. This "lethal passage" might also put us in





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 26-27 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

mind of the River Lethe, whose waters are drunk in order that we might forget our memories and the pain that inhabits them.[14] The river loses itself in its inexorable flow to the sea, "as if the earth sloped downward."

> In the terrible current I watch my last moments. The current is so strong it could carry everything away – rocks, a cathedral, a city. There's a storm blowing inside the water. A wind raging. (11)

The sea is crucial to the symbolics in place here: it is that formless equilibrium toward which everything flows, by which everything is engulfed. "Once, during the crossing of the ocean, late at night, someone died." (112) A boy, the same age as the "little white girl" commits suicide, leaving her with the terrifying memory of "the sunrise, the empty sea, and the decision to abandon the search." (113) Slow boat trips, risky crossings on river or ocean, were commonplaces of colonial life in those days; "people were used to… those waitings on the wind or fair weather, to those expectations of shipwreck, sun, and death." (109)

> …very slowly, under its own steam, the boat launched itself on the river. For a long while its tall shape could be seen advancing toward the sea… Then finally the outline of the ship was swallowed up in the curve of the earth. On a clear day you could see it slowly sink. (111)

The sea is engulfment of death, of sexuality: in the "place of distress, shipwrecked,"

> I caress his body amid the sound, the passers-by. The sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning… And it really was unto death. It has been unto death… He is on me, engulfed again. (43-45)

The homonym in French—*la mer/la mere*—draws a connection between the sea and the mother, underscored by the familiar notion of the sea as the generalized "mother-of-us-all." In *The Lover*, the mother is the voice of interdiction; she says "no" to sex:

> My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punches me, undresses me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwater, says she can smell the Chinese's scent… and shouts, for the whole town to hear, that her daughter's a prostitute, she's going to throw her out, she wishes she'd die… she's disgraced, worse than a bitch. (58)

and to writing:

> I want to write. I've already told my mother: That's what I want to do—write. No answer the first time. Then she asks, Write what? I say, Books, novels. She says grimly, When you've got your math degree you can write if you like, it won't be anything to do with me then. She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense. Later she said, A childish idea. (21)

But in doing so, the mother says "no" to the little girl herself. She clearly prefers her sons, especially the elder with whom she desires to be buried:

> She asked for him to be buried with her. I don't know where, in which cemetery. I just know it's in the Loire. Both in the same grave. Just the two of them. It's as it should be. An image of intolerable splendor. (81)

In the mother, in the family and its "monumental, unreal" (82) house, is to be found the convergence of silence, prohibition and mourning which engenders writing. The members of the family of the narrator, of the little white girl, who inhabit the text like ghostly apparitions, like photographic fragments of the immemorial past, are dead and this allows her to write in a new way:

> I've written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted around all these things without really tackling them. (7)

She skirted around them, as daylight skirted the body of the young man in Savanna Khet. Now that they are gone she can write in a new way, or so she hopes. The family haunts her, haunts the text, the writing; mother and brothers have become familiars, attendant spirits or demons, dogging her memory, her writing; offering up a variety of roles for her to play: sister, daughter, parent, lover, victim, mater. But:

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 28-29 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

> I'm still part of the family, it's there I live, to the exclusion of everywhere else. It's in its aridity, its terrible harshness, its malignance, that I'm most deeply sure of myself, at the heart of my essential certainty, the certainty that later on I'll be a writer. (75)

It is in the midst of the multiplicity of roles and reversals offered the little white girl by the complex of relationships within her malignant, shipwrecked family, that writing loses its bearings, breaks up, fragments, becomes cryptic. Again, cryptic in the sense of obscure, and as the word pertains to the containment and commemoration of the corpse of *naufrage*. Like the photographs taken or not taken, these fragments are the residue, the ruined trace of what has always already passed: the "family history of ruin and death." (25) The writing of *The Lover* is that trace or ruin, that cryptic effort to reveal, in a kind of ghostly obscurity, a cryptic encrypted self. The fragment asks the question of the remains encrypted in the self; asks the question of the immemorial past; asks the bleak question of the mute disastered world. Writing (and reading?) becomes a dynamic process of interrogation; reading (and writing?) can only be defeat: surrender, confession, acknowledgment.

Derrida, writing of Jabés' *Book of Questions* (a fragmentary, disastered, utterly shipwrecked text): "The fragment is neither a determined style nor a failure, but the form of that which is written."[15] Writing is always already rupture, interruption interrogation; it stand in principle against totality, continuity, presence because what it writes, the experience, the subjectivity it inscribes, is never a totality, is never continuous or present. Blanchot's view is similar:

> The demand, the extreme demand of the fragmentary… traverses, overturns, ruins the work because the work (totality, perfection, achievement) is the unity which is satisfied with









> itself… Fragmentation is the pulling to pieces (the tearing) of that which never has preexisted (really or ideally) as a whole, nor can it ever be reassembled in any future presence whatever. (WD60)

For Blanchot, the disaster is that which makes the demand of the fragmentary upon the work, upon writing, and causes it to shipwreck, "to be lost, to capsize." (WD46) Always a scandal to the univocality of presence, writing can instead be recuperated as the guarantor of the instability and polyvalence of meaning. For Jabés,

> …writing, from one work to another, would be only the effort of the vocables to exhaust what which is said—the instant—in order to take refuge in the unsayable, which is not that which cannot be said, but rather, on the contrary, that which has been so intimately, so totally said that it no longer says anything apart from this intimacy, this unsayable totality.[16]

The Holocaust is the disaster which motivates the exhaustion of Jabé's writing, and its efforts to exhaust the semantic possibilities of language. This fragmentary writing is, like that of Duras, a work of mourning that seeks to commemorate an impossible memory shrouded in forgetfulness and loss, as in the hastily scribbled and buried notes of the Auschwitz victims on the way to the gas: "Remember! Do not forget! But you can never remember!" You can never remember the irretrievable past that was never present; it's always a question of an oscillation between anamnesis and amnesia, the defense against or the surrender to oblivion[17], the engulfing sea of disaster. The writing of the disaster must itself constitute the remains to which it owes the obligation of mourning, must itself construct the very shipwreck it seeks to commemorate, and thus to relinquish. In order to do so, it must face its task with a serene passivity,

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 30-31 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

proceeding by fits and starts, "little by little suddenly" (WD34), crossing perilously again and again the same experience, the same remembering, the same forgetting. If every writing is always already a rewriting, the pure writer is, as Blanchot suggests, like Bartleby, a copyist. (WD145) "I would prefer not to." The proclamation of the writer's passivity in the face of exhaustion, the *scéne de naufrage* which is the writing of what cannot be written, the experience of ravaged selfhood in the era of historical catastrophe—Holocaust, Hiroshima.

In *The Lover* we may understand the passivity of this fragmentary rewriting in the returns to and rehearsals of a few key images of the narrator's initial encounters with sex and death, images separated but somehow brought together by the gap that "makes becoming possible"[18], the serene white spaces on the page. In those white spaces we might finally locate the little white girl who says "the story of my life doesn't exist", but also:

> I'm still there, watching those possessed children, as far away from the mystery now as I was then. I've never written, though I thought I wrote, never loved, though I thought I loved, never done anything but wait outside the closed door. (25)

Reading Duras, seeing her images that last all the way across, depletes me. There is no binding of the wounds opened by her work, no filling in of the great blank spaces. The narrative ebbs and flows relentlessly over the details of a life, a self, like "the sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning." And like the sea, the narrative perseveres; Duras, with her "ravaged" face, endures:

> I think I'm beginning to see my life. I think I can already say, I have a vague desire to die. From now on I treat that word and my life as inseparable… I'm going to write. (103)

The desire to die, however vague, is inseparable from the desire to write, or rather, following Blanchot, writing comes to be in spite of it. Like the beggar woman who "always ends up in Calcutta wherever she started out from: (86), Duras, the narrator, the little white girl

> goes in the same direction as the world, toward the engulfing, always distant east. One day she comes face to face with the sea. And then she's lost sight of. (87)

If to go west means to find a new land, to be a pioneer, to carve out a future, then the desire to go east is a desire to return to the past, to the "orient" as the legendary elsewhere, the place of otherness (and in this text, sexuality), and to the maternal engulfing sea, risking the disastrous crossing.

The little white girl picks up the phone. "And with the trembling, suddenly, she heard again the voice of China." (116-117)

"Until death."

NOTES

1. Marguerite Duras. *The Lover* (tr. Barbara Bray) New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p. 5. Further page references will be given within the text.

2. Cf. Levinas:

 …two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides, and the Holocaust… have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together… a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82,5: "All the foundations of the earth are shaken."

 (Emmanuel Levinas. "Simulacra: The End of the World" (tr. David Allison) in David Wood (ed.) *Writing the Future*. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 12.) Levinas' analyses of the "face-to-face" relation as fundamental alterity and basis for ethical conduct, are a kind of murmur in the background of his essay. See, for instance, *Totality and Infinity* (tr. Alphonso Lingus) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, esp. pp. 187-247.

3. In a recent book on Paul Celan, Lacoue-Labarthe writes: "what the poem translates, I propose we call *experience*, on condition that this word be taken literally – from Latin, *experiri*: the risky crossing… and this is why one can refer, strictly speaking, to a poetic existence, if existence it is that perforates a life and tears it, at times putting us beside ourselves." (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. *La Poesie comme experience*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986. Quoted in Roger Laporte. "Readings of Paul Celan" (tr. Norma Cole) in *Translating Tradition: Paul Celan in France*. ACTS 8/9 San Francisco, 1988, p. 224.)

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 32-33 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

4. Marguerite Duras. *L'amant*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984, p. 56.

5. My source here is Calvert Watkins' "Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans," an account of the reconstruction of proto-Indo-European root words from contemporary Indo-European languages (esp. English) which is included along with a lexicon in William Morris (ed.) *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.* New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969, pp1496-1550. For *nausée*, see p. 1530.

6. Mitchell Breitwieser. "*The Great Gatsby*: Grief, Jazz and the Eye-Witness" (unpublished ms.) p.2. Breitwieser's discussion of mourning in this paper, and in his recent book on Mary Rowlandson, have been of considerable value to my thinking about some of the issues explored here. See: Mitchell Breitwieser. *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief, and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, esp. the discussion of Hegel and Derrida on Antigone pp. 30-49.

7. Maurice Blanchot. *The Writing of the Disaster.* (tr. Ann Smock) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 2. Further page references will be given as (WD#) within the text.

8. In a number of his works, Blanchot maintains a penchant for speculative, even catachrestic, etymologies which proceed "by affinity and no longer solely by affiliation." (WD93) My torturous efforts with shipwreck/*naufrage* above, and throughout the paper, take their cue from him.

9. Carol Murphy notes that the French word for the chemical developing solution for photographs is révélateur. I've looked at this word on Kodak of Canada bilingual packages of "developer" for years without noting that the French term provides a decidedly more accurate and profound account of what actually takes place in the darkroom. See Carol Murphy. "Duras' *L'amant*: Memories from an Absent Photo" in Sanford S Ames (ed.) *Remains To Be Seen: Essays on Marguerite Duras.* New York: Peter Lang, 1989, pp. 171-181.

10. Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. (tr. Richard Howard) New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, pp. 76-77. The emphasis is Barthes'.

11. Ibid. p. 92. It is no accident that Barthes writes his meditation on photography during his period of mourning for his mother; and it doesn't seem unreasonable to suggest that since Duras' text is part of an effort of mourning, the place of photography within it, fading in and out like a ghostly visitation, may owe something to Barthes, her contemporary.

12. For an excellent discussion of photography and its relation to fetishism and some of the other themes at stake here, see Christian Metz. "Photography and Fetish" in October 34. Cambridge: MIT Press, Fall 1985, pp. 88-91.

13. A shifting back and forth between the subjective and objective points of view is continual throughout the text, as the first person locus of experience becomes "the child", "the little white girl", etc. creating a flux of detachment and identity and the narrator's perspective. Carol Murphy suggests that the shifting from "I" to "she" emphasizes the oscillation between the genres of fiction and autobiography, but I would argue that it inscribes, within the fiction, the shipwrecked condition of disastered subjectivity, "a rip forever ripping apart" (WD75), that "perforates a life and tears it… putting us beside our-selves" (Lacoue-Labarthe). See Murphy. "Memories of an Absent Photo".

14. Verena Andermatt Conley makes this connection in "Duras and the Scene of Writing" in *Remains To Be Seen*, pp. 183-195.

15. Jacques Derrida. "Edmond Jabés and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference* (tr. Alan Bass) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 71.

16. Edmond Jabés. *Le Petit Livre de la subversion hors de soupcon*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982, pp.55-56. Quoted and translated in Warren F Motte, Jr. *Questioning Edmond Jabés.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990, p. 7.

17. A somewhat Blanchotian etymological catachresis. Greek: *amnestia* – oblivion.

18. Maurice Blanchot. "Interruptions" (tr. Rosemarie Waldrop and Paul Auster) in Eric Gould (ed.) *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabés.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985, p. 44.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 34-35 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Some Vocal Current Electric: Melville's Faith

1993

FROM THE SINKING WHALEBROW
I read you—
you recognize me,

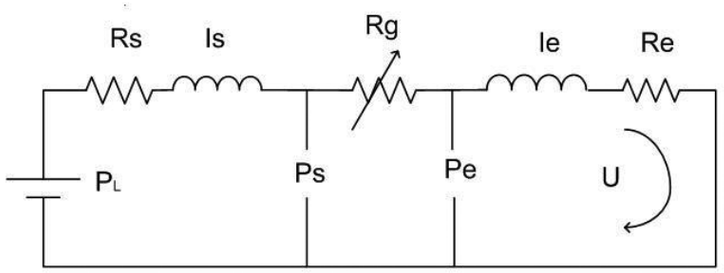
heaven
hurls itself
into the harpoon

Paul Celan

"Do you know anything about your beginnings?"

Ø I was discovered abandoned in the emergency waiting area of the newly-built Henderson General Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario in the early summer of 1952. The birthdate inscribed on my documentation, 29 June, was arrived at by conjecture. Because the authorities made considerable, though vain, effort to establish the facts of my origin, I was not adopted or named until six months later.

Ø In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Melville writes: "Would that all excellent books were foundlings, without father or mother, that so it might be, we could glorify them, without including their ostensible authors. Nor would any true man take exception to this." (PT 239)[1] What is the origin of great literature? What is its originality? And what can we mean by origin and originality, and how can we apply these terms to the work of a writer for whom "the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones… simply standing, as they do, for the mystical, ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius?" (PT 239) Perhaps, as Althusser suggested, "the function of the concept of origin, as in original sin, is to summarize in one word what has not to be thought in order to be able to think what one wants to think."[2] Perhaps, in other words, the idea of an origin is an ideological device providing a comforting



closure to what is in fact a complex, difficult, overdetermined and indeterminate openness. A mystical estate, that is, like paternity itself.[3]

Ø Consider the problematic origins of some of Melville's characters: the narrator of *Moby-Dick* will have us call him by the name of the illegitimate son of Abraham and Rachel, the errant patriarch of a lost tribe, Ahab is an orphan, having lost his widowed mother before he was a year old; the cadaverous Bartleby is "unaccountable," nothing being known of his past other than the rumour of his clerkship in the Dead Letter Office. And "Billy Budd was a foundling, a presumable by-blow, and evidently, no ignoble one." (BB 52)

Ahab remarks: "Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it." (MD 492)

A somewhat remarkable instance recurs to me.

I can tell a story. When I was about three and a half I entered hospital for an operation to correct a hearing impairment. My mother decided that this event afforded an excellent opportunity for a circumcision to be performed, something that for obscure reasons of her own she devoutly wished. She neglected to fill me in on the details. I connect my return home to the appearance in my bedroom of a bedspread, sheets, pillowcases and curtains, made for me by mother and resident paternal grandmother, who

We agree to obey in order that
a social field may be constituted

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 36-37 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

(the symbolic) within which
reason may apply itself as
a universal authority.

But reason is not LAW

Law is senseless, arbitrary
and violent. We accept the
order it entails so as to
constitute the social space on
which we can transform (us, it)

nurtured a lusty hatred for each other. These accouterments depicted characters and scenes from *Moby-Dick*: Ahab, Queequeg, the Spouter Inn, the Pequod, the White Whale, Ishmael clinging to the coffin-life-buoy. Someone told me some version of the story. It was my first encounter with Herman Melville, and it followed in the wake of a surprising and upsetting wound. The mark of a covenant not with God, but with a book.

To return

Ø I am proposing to write about what I take to be great writing. I suppose that I could do so in an impersonal, academic fashion, but I would prefer not to. I am deeply marked by Melville's work, intimately marked, tattooed by it. It tasks me and heaps me. I have worshipped it in my own work. I plan to do so again.

Ø Melville's writing fractures and obliterates. It grieves. It bursts the rule of the law of writing. It ruptures reading and it fails everywhere. It is a writing of foundlinghood and foundering. It is the principled and rigorously scattering experience of the sacred, if we understand "experience" in its etymology as "a perilous crossing."[4] A risky crossing threatening shipwreck, engulfment and loss—of self, of knowledge, of meaning. A perilous risky crossing of the terrible abyss of the sacred, subject to disaster and, passively and inevitably, leaving ragged remains. And what resolute impulse carries him?

Ø In his "autobiography" Goethe writes:

> In Faith, I said, everything depends on the fact of believing; what is believed is perfectly indifferent. *Faith is a profound sense of security for the present and future, and this assurance springs from confidence in an immense, all-powerful, and inscrutable Being.* The firmness of this confidence is the one grand point; but what we think of this Being depends on our other faculties, or even on circumstances, and is wholly indifferent. Faith is a holy vessel into which everyone stands ready to pour his feelings, his understanding, his imagination as perfectly as he can. With Knowledge it is directly the opposite.[5]

Melville purchased this book in London on Christmas Day in 1849. The italicized passage he triple-scored in the margin of his copy.[6] I imagine him reading the book during the sea voyage home to the room in which he would complete *Moby-Dick*, and I take it that his marginal marks indicate an affinity with the German poet's view. Faith is not knowledge, is not knowable. It is pure form, but not in the sense of legal formality. For to be measured, form must have content, but as pure form Faith is entirely without content. Whatever content we, writers or readers, give it is wholly indifferent; it need not be "tinctured with the biblical element," nor with the rule of any law, religious or otherwise. This idea of Faith is profoundly antinomian, deeply personal, decidedly mystical. In it resonate these lines of Hawthorne:

> "Faith!" shouted goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying —"Faith! Faith! as if bewildered wretches were seeking her, all through the wilderness.[7]

Faith is a vessel uneasily bearing a mournful cargo of powerful feeling. I am saying that it is from athwart its keening deck that Melville writes tormented the "sane madness of vital truth." (PT 244)

Plump upon Billy, Lieutenant Ratcliffe pounced. And him only he elected. Billy made no demur.

This slightly recut passage from *Billy Budd, Sailor* (which book will be my primary focus here) enunciates three important aspects of Melville's Faith: the erotic; the singular; the passive.

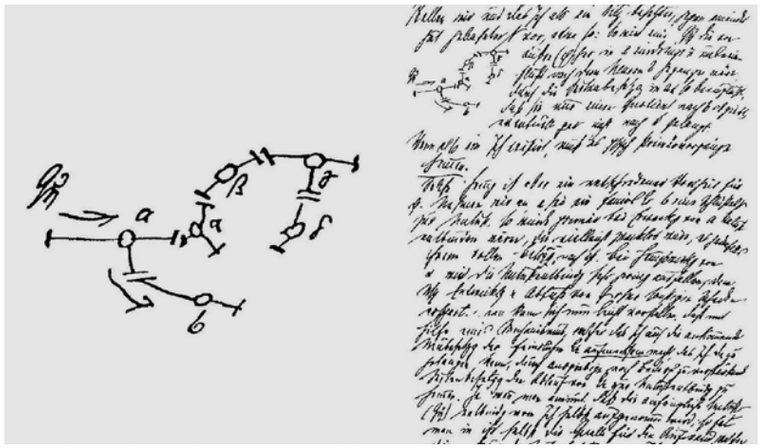
mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 38-39 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Not without a sort of joy

Ø The erotic: obvious in the account of Billy's beauty, Claggart's desire, the spilling of the soup, etc. But I am more interested in the points at which it comes together with the sacred. The narrator's speculation concerning the interview between Vere and Billy after the conviction and sentencing: Billy's response to his impending sacrifice is supposed to be "not without a sort of joy" in respect of the Captain's openness of address to him. The two men "radically sharing" a rare quality of intimacy, the older "melting back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity," the younger "caught… to his heart," are seized on the brink of obedient surrender to "an exacting behest."

> But there is no telling the sacrament, seldom if in any case revealed to the gadding world, wherever under circumstances at all akin to those here attempted to be set forth two of great Nature's nobler order embrace. There is privacy at the time, inviolable to the survivor; and holy oblivion, the sequel to each diviner magnanimity, providentially covers all at last. (BB 115)

Billy is prelapsarian Adam, adolescent Isaac, Jesus Lamb of God: every innocent slaughtered in the name of law or state or history or relation, but also that inevitable excessive blasphemous loss that obtains with every effort to make the ungraspable inescapable. He is the exaction demanded by that depravity hinged on the back of every insistent Calvinistic "delight."



That signal object

Ø The singular: Billy is the strange attractor, the magnificent singularity about which everyone and everything is organized. Only he can be elect, alone possessing the unique mass of searing qualities that will guarantee the fracturing drama that impels the disaster of this text. The resonance with Ishmael's orphanhooded "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" is striking. Or George Oppen's line: "the shipwreck of the singular." Or Celan: "Poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language." Or Melville, aged and forgotten, wandering in the portside quays or the pavements of Broadway. Jack Chase and Hawthorne and Malcolm and Stanwix lost to him forever, returning nightly to his desk to forge with resolution this lonely poem of solitary longing.

Without movement, he lay as in a trance

Ø The passive: In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot discusses Bartleby's "preference not to" which "has none of the simplicity of a refusal":

> I would prefer not to. This sentence speaks in the intimacy of our nights: negative preference, the negation that effaces preference and is effaced therein: the neutrality of that which is not among the things there are to do—the restraint, the gentleness that cannot be called obstinate, and that outdoes obstinacy with those few words… Language, perpetuating itself, keeps still.[8]

It's not just Billy's passivity, his making "no demur," that is at stake here. It is Melville's faith in language, in the poetic language which he allows to perpetuate in his text. This faith also "makes no demur" in the face of its irretrievable foundering, of the loss and excess it articulates, of the impossibility of the reduction of its language to a stable and univocal meaning. Melville prefers not to write properly, but abides quietly in the disturbing torment of his covert and desperate books, pinioning his faith on their drift.

Ø Blanchot again:

> we approach the night without darkness. This is the irreducible—the incompatible that which is not compatible with humanity… Human weakness, which even frailty does not

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 40-41 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

> disclose, betrays us since we belong, at each instant, to the immemorial past of our death—by virtue of being indestructible because always and infinitely destroyed. The infinity of our destruction, this is the measure of passivity.[9]

The drift of language subverts language's law: it is antinomian. But drift risks destruction, disaster, death. Of self, of world, of text. And this is Melville's risk.

Get into X— , enter his labyrinth and get out again

Melville's name and my name mean the same thing. Both are the names of towns and both derive from the obsolete French verb *meler*, meaning to come together, to meet, to intersect. So, Cartmell is a place where carts meet, a market town, and Melville is a town at a crossroads. I exhaustively translate them both as the letter "X" and all it suggests: crossroad, cross out, crossed up, the optical chiasma, the rhetorical trope chiasma, crossbones, crucifixion, an algebraic variable, something unknown, the prefix ex-, the signature of those who, like Queequeg, cannot write (or do not know) their names. I have made considerable fuss about this in some films.[10] Of course, Cartmell is not really my name, except by virtue of a sort of drifting of the patronymic. But maybe this is always the case.

All adrift to go?

Drift. Drive. Lacan suggested as a translation of Freud's *trieb* ("drive," but given as the notoriously inadequate "instinct" in the English translation) the French word *dérive*, which in addition to the obvious relation to the question of origin, means "drift."[11]

I did not quite see the drift of all this.

In Ch. 11 the narrator drifts in to direct the reader indirectly across "the deadly space between" normal nature and the natural depravity of Claggart. "The point of the present story turning on the hidden nature of the master-at-arms has necessitated this chapter." (BB 76-77) Is Claggart the point on which the story turns?

> Though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimidate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. (BB 76)

This description may make Claggart sound like the antinomian Melville, but as the narrator's necessary interruption shows, the master-at-arms is precisely subject to necessity, definition, nomination. Subject, in short, to his nature and subject absolutely. And that nature is his law, and such a law is inviolable. Like Ahab he can only say "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush!" (MD 168) The drift of Claggart cannot be seen because Claggart, unlike Melville, does not risk drifting.

life by shipwreck

Ø In my film *Farrago* I recount a dream I had around the time one of my intellectual heroes visited Toronto. In the dream this "wise man of Paris" visits me at home and offers to tattoo me: he has a miniature electronic tattooing needle in his wallet. He demonstrates on (his or my?) wrist that the number of passes necessary is determined by pressure and pain. He begins to tattoo my belly: there's a diagram that he's following but I can't see it. When he's finished I have to hold a special paper against the tattoo (blotting? hygiene?). He leaves, saying he'll be back in two week to finish. Later, I look for the diagram, and find it. It resembles Freud's diagram of neurone connections in the *Entwurf*, except it's a negative image. I look at the tattoo: it appears to be almost finished. It's a three-masted, fully rigged ship, like a whaler, in green, red and blue. There are two inscriptions in French: below it *le livre de la mer* and above a word I can't quite decipher but which reminds me of "nautilus," though that's not it. Subsequently, I've decided that the word was *naufrage* or shipwreck.

Ø The word "naufrage" came into use in English during the 14th century. According to the *O.E.D.* it was used to designate shipwreck in the documents of marine insurers at least until the middle of the 18th century. It is listed in *Webster's*. I believe Melville knew it.

Ø The first part of *naufrage* derives from a proto-Indo-European root word meaning boat, from which we get English nautical and naval

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 42-43 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

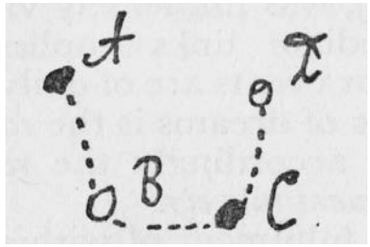
terminology, more interestingly from my point of view, this root word also means death, exhaustion, distress and necessity, and is the origin for a number of northern European words for things like corpse, need, and boredom.[12] The shipwrecked text is one that is foundered and fragmented; exhausted and distressed; cast out, destitute, dispossessed. And it is also a text of difficult mourning, one which must grapple with the question (German: *Frage* – question; *fragen* – to ask, to question) of what is left after the vessel is sunk, the question of remains, that "swarming unaware blasphemous stuff that lacks the grace, decency and fidelity to follow value off the stage, to leave a respectable zero."[13]

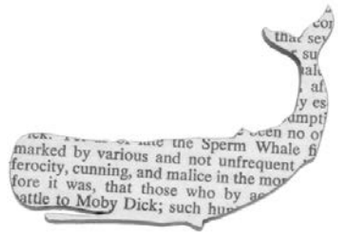
Ø Shipwreck is the disaster *par excellence*, lacking what Maurice Blanchot calls "the ruinous purity of destruction" which would eliminate any remainder. Blanchot enhances the nautical aspect of disaster by suggesting that it might mean "being separated from the star… the decline which characterizes disorientation when the link with fortune from on high is cut."[14] In other words, disaster is the result of being unable to navigate during a risky crossing, being alienated from or incomprehending of the bleak intractable otherness of Nature, that "excessiveness of uncodifiable law… to which we are destined without being party to it."[15] Part of the repellent necessity of Nature's law is that fragmented residue around which we must, but cannot, navigate. For a writer like Melville, it is precisely the case that

> to write is no longer to situate death in the future—the death which is always already past; to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it. To write is to know that death has taken place even though it has not been experienced, and to recognize it in the forgetfulness that it leaves.[16]

Something suggestive of a mother

Ø "Supposing the story to open with the wreck." In his letter to Hawthorne of 13 August 1852, Melville suggests that the facts of the case of Agatha Hatch Robertson might serve his friend as the basis for a story. "It has occurred to me that this thing lies very much in a vein, with which you are peculiarly familiar. To be plump, I think that in this matter you would make a better hand at it than I would." However, sparked by a "lively interest" in "the great patience, & endurance, & resignedness of the women of the island (Nantucket) in submitting so uncomplainingly





to the long, long abscences (sic) of their sailor husbands," Melville proceeds to provide detailed instructions as to just how such a story ought to be written. Agatha is to be "active during the wreck" as the savior of her young husband-to-be (Melville tellingly refers to him as Robinson). The sea encroaches, its malignity placidly eyed by the innocent land. The wreck endures:

> …she goes to pieces, all but her stern-part. This in the course of time becomes embedded in the sand—after the lapse of some years showing nothing but the sturdy stem (or, prow-bone) projecting some two feet at low water. All the rest is filled & packed down with the sand. So that after her husband has disappeared the sad Agatha every day sees this melancholy monument, with all its remindings.

Ø Like Bartleby's, Agatha's passivity comes to pertain to the spot. She is "feverishly expecting" a letter from her absent husband. For seventeen years she patiently attends "a post surmounted with a little rude wood box with a lid to it & a leather hinge."

> As her hopes gradually decay in her, so does the post itself & the little box decay. The post rots in the ground at last. Owing to its being little used—hardly used at all—grass grows rankly about it. At last a little bird nests in it. At last the post falls.

This shipwreck of letters drifts nicely into the scrivener's rumoured employment in the Dead Letter Office:

> Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling the dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annual

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 44-45 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

> burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. (PT 45)

"Predestinated," these letters never reach their destination, errantly drifting toward disaster. Bartleby, "a bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic," (PT 32) consigns these doomed and sacred missives to holocaustic fire. But something remains, reminds, remembers. Ashes; these texts.

now foundering in the deeps

Ø Derrida, writing of Jabès' *Book of Questions* (a fragmentary, disastered, utterly shipwrecked text): "The fragment is neither a determined style nor a failure, but the form of that which is written."[17] Writing is always already rupture, interruption, interrogation; it stands in principle against totality, continuity, presence because what it writes, the experience, the subjectivity it inscribes, is never a totality, is never continuous or present. Blanchot's view is similar:

> The demand, the extreme demand of the fragmentary… traverses, overturns, ruins the work because the work (totality, perfection, achievement) is the unity which is satisfied with itself… Fragmentation is the pulling to pieces (the tearing) of that which never has preexisted (really or ideally) as a whole, nor can it ever be reassembled in any future presence whatever.[18]

For Blanchot, the disaster is that which makes the demand of the fragmentary upon the work, upon writing, and causes it to shipwreck, "to be lost, to capsize."[19] Always a scandal to the univocality of presence, writing can instead be recuperated as the guarantor of the instability and polyvalence of meaning.

You can never remember the irretrievable past that was never present; it is always a question of an oscillation between anamnesis and amnesia, the defense against or the surrender to oblivion, the engulfing sea of disaster. The writing of the disaster must itself constitute the remains to

which it owes the obligation of mourning, must itself construct the very shipwreck it seeks to commemorate, and thus to relinquish. In order to do so, it must face its task with a serene passivity, proceeding by fits and starts, "little by little suddenly,"[20] crossing perilously again and again the same experience, the same remembering, the same forgetting.

You see then, whither, prompted by duty and the law, I steadfastly drive.

Glanced upon by Billy Budd, the mere aspect of Captain Vere is enough to compel the foretopman to aver, "I have said all, sir." (BB 108) Vere exists wholly within a field of meaning and, despite the fullness of his feeling for Billy, it is impossible for him to adopt an external attitude toward that field. There is no continuous passage from its inside to its outside; as Althusser put it, ideology has no outside. The screaming abyss of this vicious circle appears most purely under the guise of tautology: "law is law." Like the expression "God is God," the equation equivocates, forebodingly giving rise to an ominous reversal. "Law is… the guarantee of order, peace, harmony, tranquility; and… law is that governable lacerating cruelty that springs illegitimately from nowhere, cutting down every rosy-tanned innocent in the quick of his meek loving life. Vere will not, cannot veer from "strict adherence to usage." (BB 117) It is precisely usage that antinomian Melville lurkingly subverts.

the first muffled murmur of its sloping advance

Under the open sky of a lifelong "night so luminous," "upon the monotonous blank of the twilight sea," Melville is one of those who "exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it."[21] He is attuned to the murmurous muffle of the torrent of love and rage, and tunes its muffled murmuring through Moss and Moby. He will not play the silver whistle.





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 46-47 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

his lurking defect

Writing a biography of his father, Julian Hawthorne visited Melville in the spring of 1883:

> At first he was disinclined to talk; but finally he said several interesting things, among the most remarkable was that he was convinced Hawthorne had all his life concealed some great secret, which would, were it known, explain all the mysteries of his career.[22]

I take it that when Melville speaks of Hawthorne, he's really speaking of himself, and I call upon the "Mosses" essay to back me. Once Neil Schmitz said to me that stuttering was a form of Knowledge. I will claim that the stuttering evident in Melville's stammering literary career is the hesitant signal of a patient Faith in the beyond of articulation. In the tormenting ecstasy of that beyond, of that "axis of reality."

some vocal current electric

Ø Perhaps it is true that "it all finally has to do with the throat, SPEECH."[23] Melville speaks to me electric, utters my name. In "his grave bearing" I seek my paternity. I could say, with the gentle boy – "They call me Ibrahim, and my home is here."[24]

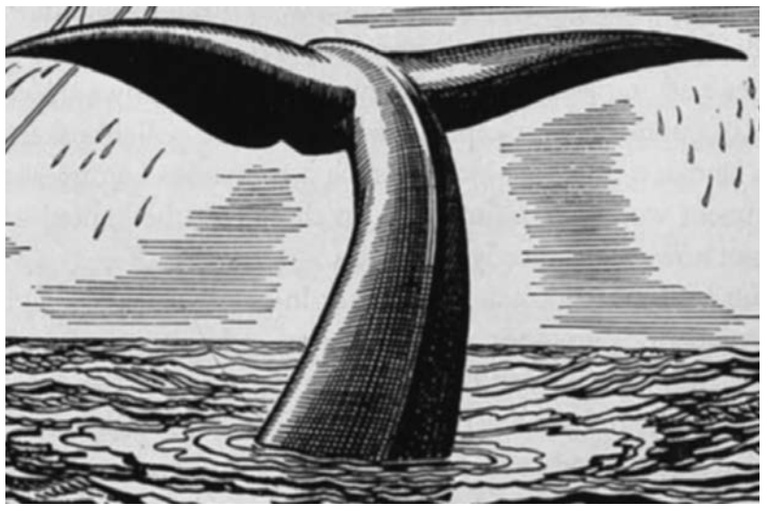
Ø In these books, this fresh earth, these sacred plots.

KEY TO MELVILLE CITATIONS

BB: *Billy Budd, Sailor (an inside narrative)* (ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts Jr.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

MD: *Moby-Dick or the Whale* (ed. H. Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle) Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1988.

PT: *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* (ed. H. Hayford, Alma MacDougass, G. Thomas Tanselle et al.) Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987.



mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 48-49 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

NOTES

1 The key to references given in the text can be found above.

2 Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital* (tr. Ben Brewster) London: New Left Books, 1970, p. 63.

3 As Joyce would have it. See the Library chapter in *Ulysses*.

4 See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. *La poésie comme expérience*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986. Quoted in Roger Laporte. "Readings of Paul Celan" (tr. Norma Cole) in *Translating Tradition: Paul Celan in France* ACTS 8/9 San Francisco, 1988, p. 224.

5 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Autobiography of Goethe. Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life* (tr. A.J.W. Morrison) London: Bohn, 1848-49. Vol. 2, p. 15.

6 See Walker Cowan. *Melville's Marginalia* New York and London: Garland, 1987, Vol. 1, p. 564.

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown" in *Selected Tales and Sketches* (ed. M. Colacurcio) New York: Viking Penguin, 1987, p. 141.

8 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (tr. Ann Smock) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 145.

9 Maurice Blanchot. "Discours sur la patience (*en marges des livres d'Emmanuel Levinas*)" Le Nouveau Commerce 30-31 (1975) p. 42.

10 My series *Narratives of Egypt* (comprised of *Prologue: Infinite Obscure*, *In the Form of the Letter X*, *Cartouche* and *Farrago*) made between 1984 and 1987 is some kind of effort to deal with Melville cinematically.

11 Lacan also gave a cinematic rendering of the drive: "Let me say that if there is anything resembling a drive it is a montage… The drive is precisely that montage by which sexuality participates in the psychical life, in a way that must conform to the gap-like structure that is the structure of the unconscious." (Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller) (tr. Alan Sheridan) New York: Norton, 1977, pp 169, 176.)

12 My source here is Calvert Watkins' "Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans," an account of the reconstruction of proto-Indo-European root words from contemporary Indo-European languages (esp. English) which is included along with a lexicon in William Morris (ed.) *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969, pp 1496-1550. For nau- see p. 1530.

13 Mitchell Breitwieser. "*The Great Gatsby*: Grief, Jazz and the Eye-Witness" (unpublished ms. forthcoming in *The Arizona Quarterly*) p. 2 Breitweiser's discussion of mourning in this paper, and in his book on Mary Rowlandson, have been of considerable value to my thinking about some of the issues explored here. See: Mitchell Breitwieser. *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief, and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, esp. the discussion of Hegel and Derrida on *Antigone*, pp30-49.

14 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* p. 2

15 Ibid. p2

16 Ibid p. 66 In a number of his works, Blanchot maintains a penchant for speculative, even catachrestic, etymologies which proceed "by affinity and no longer solely by affiliation." (ibid. p93) My torturous efforts with naufrage take their cue from him.

17 Jacques Derrida. "*Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book*" in Writing and Difference (tr. Alan Bass) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 71.

18 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* p. 60.

19 Ibid. p. 46.

20 Ibid. p. 34.

21 Paul Celan. "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen" in *Collected Prose* (tr. Rosemarie Waldrop) Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press. 1986, p. 35.

22 Julian Hawthorne. "Hawthorne at Lennox" *Booklover's Weekly* Dec. 30, 1901. Quoted in Jay Leyda. T*he Melville Log* New York: Gordian Press, 1951/1969, Vol. II, p. 782.

23 Charles Olson. *Call Me Ishmael* San Francisco: City Light Books, 1958, p. 104.

24 Nathaniel Hawthorne. "The Gentle Boy" in *The Scarlet Letter and Selected Tales* (ed. Thomas Connolly) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p. 334.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 50-51 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Landscape With Shipwreck

2000

— You've left out a lot.

— No doubt. But is it ever possible to avoid gaps, ruptures, deficiencies, omissions, even ignorances and stupidities, in a commentary of this sort? Isn't every reading (viewing) always and only partial, the "taking" of a reading, as if checking temperature or humidity or rainfall, which must be re-enacted a vast multiplicity of times before any reasonably valid conceptualization of the climate can be gauged? And isn't that conceptualization at best only "reasonably valid," since at bottom the climatic system is chaotic, borne by uncertain and ungauged disturbances, critically unpredictable, in the last instance outside representation or symbolization? You can never be sure when you'll wind up in peril.

— You seem obsessed with the weather. What does this have to do with anything?

— Well, you see where I'm living. But I don't think the metaphor's inapt. I've tried to say (as is true for all that we can, with integrity, call "art") that at the heart of this "body" of work lies coiled a disturbing, chaotic, unpredictable, unmasterable "something;" compelling while repulsive, terrifying yet enchanting, offering a serene forecast of shelter, warmth, comfort at the same time that it bodes implacably the perilous risk of absolute loss, fracture, desheltering.

— Or, to shift ground a little and bring you back to your theme, we could call this precarious "something" (following your beloved Blanchot) "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs."

— I hear that, chèr! I'm beginning to think I might could have a twin brother.

— Well, we've been spending an awful lot of time together; perhaps we've come to resemble one another. But let me ask you this: I understand your lack of enthusiasm for the seamless text, but this is a pretty herky-jerky collection of observations, quotations (the relevance of which is often questionable), theses (on occasion possibly half-baked, or once in a while even over-baked), reminiscences, rhetorical questions, and so on. It seems at times that you barely have a plan. How is the reader to make sense out of this?

— I have no desire to instruct readers on how to read, any more than I'd be inclined to instruct film-goers on how to view (if it can be put that way). All I can say is that the bits that I've put in place to make up this piece arrived via some form of compulsion; in a way, I don't trust them any more than you do. I could go out on a limb and say that these fragments somehow coalesce around the influence of some "strange attractor," which could be the film that you and I have only heard about, but which the reader will have seen presumably. I guess I can hope that at least some combination of my various bits will operate as a productive node to which the reader can link his or her (in principle unique) experience of Phil's cinema, and carry on that experience in an otherwise unlikely direction. I will say that although I haven't tried to be cryptic, the subject at stake here has something to do with the crypt.

— OK, another thing: I have to say that this piece sometimes seems as much about you as about Phil's films. I mean, you've been monkeying with the metaphorics of shipwreck for years now, and then there's the Blanchot, the psychoanalysis, this idea of singularity, the various references to Mobile and to the blues, . . .

— I'm going to take those out, I think.





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 52-53 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

— …all right then… but also Sam, Jazzbo and his (or your) toothpick, and even your current status as (may I say it?) a bit of drifting debris. And of course (what a surprise!) you work Melville into it. Isn't this a bit hobby-horsical?

— In attending to the singularity of the work I recognize the singularity not of its maker, but of myself. This would be true, I would say, for any attentive respondent to any work. But this encounter with my own singularity is neither simple nor simply satisfying. It is precisely that which overwhelms the subject's capacity to grasp it. It defies intelligibility, symbolization; one can't put it into words. And even to talk here about "recognition" or "encounter" is imprecise: maybe I can say that the experience of the work offers, or maybe only figures, an approach. And it is this experience (let's say again, "risky crossing") that draws me into the dangerous unknown of that aspect of my subjectivity that everywhere cuts against the grain of everything I take myself to be: that lacerates my "identity," let's say. And so, while enthralled, I'm also engulfed; while exhilarated, I'm also dispossessed. And therefore it's normal that I or anyone would be inclined to cling to whatever familiar flotsam drifts to hand, and to use it! After all, what else is there? (By the way, I'd say that something like this—or even precisely this—goes on for the maker in the process, the experience of making the work as well.)

— I'm not sure I buy that, but I'll think about it. The last thing I have to say you're probably not going to like. But really, this idea of putting our discussion at the beginning of the piece bothers me! Isn't it going to look like some sort of disclaimer, or worse, some obsessional dodge that seeks to qualify or clarify or otherwise perfect





or render more palatable (and thus somehow subvert) what you've already written? Can't you just let it stand?

— Maybe I just can't stand it. Anyway, aren't prefaces always produced after the fact, after the work is done, and don't they often bear little or no relation either to the style or the substance of what they purport to introduce? They frequently appear to have different projects or agendas from the work proper, don't they? Well, maybe I'm just joshing. But the serious answer would be that one has to start with something, somewhere. I know it could look like an inane stratagem; it's even possible that this part was in fact invented, and written first!

— That's true. It does seem odd that we could be eating this succulent black mess (it really is good, by the way!) if you've already washed ashore in Buffalo! After all, where would you have gotten the shrimpheads?

— Well, I don't care that readers may think it's completely fictional; surely they realize that even within the realm of documentary film such things can be employed to productive purpose, so why not here? Reality is by no means a sure access to truth. It may be utterly no access. Besides, you know good and well my spintrian history with the act of writing. I need every tool and trick that might ease the release of the thing. Maybe this will only shed more obscurity on what I've written, but that doesn't matter. I'm not trying to clarify or even interpret; certainly not to analyze. I'm here to respond, as attentively as I can, and if it has to be from the saddle of my hobby-horse (or from somewhere between the stirrup and the ground) then so be it. If I've done a good job, then perhaps my experience of Phil's cinema (at least insofar as it appears in desultory translation here) will resonate, in consonance or dissonance, with some readers, to what I hope would be some useful effect. Finally, I take my maxim from a wonderful former student who, of her poignant, moving and absolutely singular films, once said: "I do what I do." I hope I can live up to it.

— Well, thanks for the gumbo. Maybe we should go out. I bet it's cooled off some.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 54-55 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

— I'm not sure I'm ready. You know I like to be stationary. I think I'll just stay inside for now.

• • • • •

Here at one view are our blighted prospects and the reward of our toil scattered to the winds.

It is a film as yet unseen, as yet, at this writing, unfinished, perhaps unnamed, which is the occasion for this and the other writing in this book, or at least for its collection here. An absent film; a lost object. A work of mourning that I somehow mourn in its absence, its yet-to-be.

I can testify.

I was present when Phil and Marian met. This is what I remember: it was about 18 years ago, in the late spring or early summer of 1983, after a screening of Alan Zweig's *Where's Howie*? at the Funnel. There was a gathering at AZ's place on Palmerston. I remember Marian telling stories of private-duty nursing in Los Angeles involving Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Jackson and Larry Flynt. I remember the rich intimacy of her voice; the fierce grope and exhilaration of her intellect. I can still see (am I imagining it?) the mad glint of wild hilarity in her enormous eyes. At the end of the evening Marian stood at the door to leave, and as if addressing the company in general asked: "So who's gonna take me home?" It was a question the undertones of which were in no way concealed. Phil was on his feet in no time. They went home together and remained together for twelve years. The message always arrives at its destination.

Marian after Marian Day, the feast of Mary, the birthday of god as a mother. Marian the stoneskipper, burrower, grubworm, worker in memory, digger into the past. That past, too, as maternal: we can go there for safety, comfort, knowledge; to find, as Wayne Salazar suggests in *Destroying Angel*, "peace before we die, contentment not confusion." A refuge, a safe harbor. And Time itself as supramaternal; in Paul Celan's formulation, *zitzenprächtig*: splendid with teats. Nourishment without remit, the source, the fountainhead—-the stuff of cinema.

On a seashore in Newfoundland, at the close of *The Road Ended At The Beach* (the apotheosis of the "road film"), we hear a little girl singing a vaguely menacing improvised song about who her mother loves and doesn't love and why.

But none of the temporal as maternal without an attendant threat: Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Wayne asks, "when we reclaim the past, what do we unleash?" Is the devouring, superegoic aspect of the maternal apt to assail us as we pursue our personal archeologies? Does it threaten to invade us and operate within us—-like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—-until we are consumed? Must we go there anyway? Marian thought we must.

• • • • •

Maurice Blanchot: "Reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty—at bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend." (*The Writing of the Disaster*)

I want to extend what Blanchot calls "reading" (would it be "the experience of literature?") to include the experience of cinema, and point out what may be obvious: that to take the risky leap does not guarantee that the abyss will be crossed without incident, or at all.

• • • • •

A Cano-centric bowdlerization of the first line of Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*: "I take the LAND to be the central fact to man born in Canada, from the last Ice Age till now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy." Unlike the American SPACE which is Olsen's concern and which is precisely space in that it exists to be occupied, the hostility of our LAND was and is unmasterable, impossible to fill up. It remains there, pitiless, pernicious, pristine (the Bowron clearcut and similar inanities notwithstanding).

It is well established that the landscape figures crucially in Canadian art, and critical discussion of Phil Hoffman's cinema has often embraced

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 56-57 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

that thematic, and not without reason. Consider just about any of the films: the camera frequently dwells on fields, forests, rocky shores, horizons, even visually interrogates in close-up detail the elements that give the land its scape: bark of trees, surfaces of rocks, beach sand, tide pools, grasses and leaves, and so on. And *Sweep*, a film in part about cinematic forebears, opens with an Arctic landscape followed by some clips from a film called *On To Ungava*, which was the site of the limit-text of Canadian (we might as well say all) landscape film: Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*.

I recall that around fifteen years ago, in a spurious gesture toward taxonomy (if not taxidermy), some wag came up with the idea that a particular set of stylistic features or themes (I forget which) could be discerned in a group of films which he designated by the major geographic formation near which the makers worked and/or grew up. It was called the Escarpment School, and in its uncontrollable sprawl eventually came to include, along with Hoffman's films, the work of Richard Kerr, Rick Hancox, Gary Popovich, Steve Sanguedolce, perhaps even Mike Hoolboom. Maybe there were others. I think that my own work was implicated. I'm fairly sure that this started out as a joke, but I can attest that I've since seen it referred to in critical articles of the most redoubtable nature.]

I am interested here not in the landscape, but in what appears in the landscape of Hoffman's cinema: something unsettlingly homely and disturbingly familiar precisely in its brokenness, fracture and disjunction. An unapproachable, uncanny, impossible yet enabling fragmentation of the true, without which this, Hoffman's, or any truthful testimony would not be possible.

Here lay our beautiful ship, a floating and dismal wreck,—which but a few minutes before appeard in all her glory, the pride and boast of her capt and officers, and almost idolized by her crew, with all sails neatly set and trimd to the breeze presenting to the eye the fac similie of a ship about to leave the harbour on a summers day under the admiring gaze of hundreds to witness such a scene.

I can call it *shipwreck*.

• • • • •





When I taught filmmaking, I described it as a process of fragmentation, of dealing with the fragmentary. One used a camera and possibly a sound recorder to fracture the profilmic world into bits: *decoupage*. Through selecting, realigning, combining, adding to, superimposing, and mixing those bits one altered their contexts, gave them new power and meaning: *collage*. And by giving the bits a definitive arrangement, a final and intractable temporal order, one had a film: *montage*. I think this is a fair, though perhaps idiotically simplified, account of what filmmakers do, and I think it's more or less what Phil Hoffman does. But what Hoffman doesn't do is respond to the pressure toward an ultimate seamlessness in the final product. It's obvious from where this pressure comes; there's no need to rehearse its origins here. Hoffman responds, is responsible to, a different calling, a distinctly inexorable, though perhaps more discreet, demand.

A speculative etymology, in the manner of Blanchot: *the fragmentary asks a question* (Ger. *fragen*, to ask or to question).

If we give the name "reality" to that which corresponds to the field of the symbolic, to that which can be, precisely, symbolized, represented, given fully to experience, then it is the impulse of its other to which Hoffman responds. We can call this other "the real:" that which escapes or exceeds symbolization; the unrepresentable, the impossible, the fragmentary, the disastrous, the unconscious, the sublime; the singular. Perhaps it is not exact to speak of a response to this call, since it is unclear in what way it might actually be "heard." Say instead that one maintains an openness, an availability; a passivity before and beyond any possible activity. One is responsive by being responsible to and for one's own passivity which, although it resides with the subject, is encountered (passively, passionately) as if it were an exterior force; one suffers it, endures it and remains

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 58-59 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





(by means of this passion, passively) available, open to the possibility of the impossible, the presence of non-presence, the inexhaustibly, intransigently other, the negative. Or, I will say again, the singular.

George Oppen: "The shipwreck of the singular." (*Of Being Numerous*)

• • • • •

Emmanuel Levinas: "…two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides and the holocaust—have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the 'I think'… doing its utmost to reassemble the fantastic of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82, 5: 'All the foundations of the earth are shaken.'" (*Simulacra: The End of the World*)

When experience is already torn to shreds, what does the film become when it, when its maker (as subject), responds to the radical demand of what I am calling the singular? There is no need to repeat (unless we are, as I am, unable to avoid the compulsion to do so) that it cannot be seamless, cannot achieve a total closure; can't, in some sense, ever be wholly finished. It can't in any way pretend to be an imitation of life or a representation of reality. It can't look to the modernist consolation of formal purity, and it must stand on the other side of modernism's melancholy, nostalgia and regret. Instead, this is the cinema of the accidental stab, the innovative risk; it follows no rules other than the rules invented in the immediacy and responsibility of its every instance of making.

Father: "What is a catastrophe?"
Daughter: "The first stanza of a love poem."
(from *Passion* by Jean-Luc Godard)

Not documentary cinema, but the film as essay. And I take "essay" here in its full dump etymological sense: to try, to try out, to test, to test the value, to take a chance, to experiment (O.Fr. *essai*, *assai*, a trial; Vulg.L. *exagiare*, to weigh out; Late L. *exagium*, a weighing, a balance; and more speculatively, L. *exaggerare*, to pile up, exaggerate, from *agger*, pile or heap). In the film essay, it is not the fragment as an end in itself that is at issue (that would be modernist nostalgia); rather the fragmentary as the infinite heap of fragments, whether found or made. A cinema of the collection, the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir: elements of longing, but not a melancholic longing that abides incomplete, caught in the defensive web of desire; rather longing that motivates, that moves and impels, that tasks and heaps the maker in the making, invoking the unpresentable in presentation itself.

James Joyce: "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling that arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause." (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)

The encounter of desire with the beautiful arouses pity, gives rise to intelligibility, and leads the subject into the domain of knowledge (the symbolic). The (non-)encounter of the drive with the sublime arouses terror, gives rise to non-sense, and leads the subject into the domain of truth (the real).

If modernist cinema is a cinema of desire, whose affect is pity attended by pleasure, and whose nostalgia for some lost plenitude of the past leads to a melancholic (and so, in principle, incomplete) mourning for the trace of that loss in the ruined fragment as such, then I will say that the film essay exemplifies a cinema of the drive, whose affect is terror attended by enjoyment, whose mourning is accomplished in the future anterior, whose movement circulates, and circulates around, its fragmentary objects, and whose passive passion/passionate passivity gives itself as an approach and a witness to what will have been made. The film essay is in this sense postmodern.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 60-61 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

• • • • •

Celan: *Neimand / zeugt für den / Zeugen*. (*Poems of Paul Celan*)

In Mexico, during the collection of footage for what eventually became *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, a bus on which Phil Hoffman was riding stopped, and a woman came screaming across a field. Her little boy had been run over and killed (by the bus?). Phil watched from inside with camera in hand, trying to decide whether or not to film. He didn't. He can attest to the event, he says it happened, but he doesn't have evidence to back up his claim because he didn't turn the camera on. Later, at the Grierson Seminar, *Somewhere Between* is screened, an entire film structured around the death of a child and the absent image of it, and a news correspondent who'd made a number of films about Vietnam approaches Hoffman: "Phil, I really enjoyed the discussion, but you know when you were in the editing room, didn't you just wish you had the footage?"

I put the camera down. The film is a cinemato-poetic account of an event, of the experience of an event, the evidentiary image of which is missing; the maker attests that it never existed, was never made, and does not reside undeveloped in some freezer. So what we have is his testimony. He testifies to what was apparent to him, to the visible, to what was available to experience:

> on the road dead, lies a mexican youth
>
> the white sheet
> is pulled over the dead boy's body
> the children wept
>
> the little girl
> with big eyes
> waits by her dead brother
>
> and he testifies to the unseen, the non-experience, as well:
>
> the boy's spirit left through its blue.

But he doesn't have the hard evidence, the documentary proof, for either sort of testimony: we know the camera never lies, but it's possible that Phil could.

For testimony to be what it is, to remain precisely testimony and thus retain its character as something other than a direct access to "truth," it must necessarily be haunted by what it excludes: the documentary evidence that we suppose never lies, but also, and more to the point, the possibility of the lie itself, of perjury, mistake or lack of fidelity. In short, testimony is inevitably haunted, even possessed, by the possibility of fiction. The witness is himself riven by this possession. His passion is a desire to avow, to confess without reserve, to bring forward an utter truthfulness in the face of the other's "Tell me everything!" But this passion is also to be understood as a martyrdom (Gr. *martis*, witness) in the sense of putting oneself on the line, making truth and bearing bodily witness to it through the attenuation of one's being, as martyrs bear witness with their bodies in dying; as passivity in its autonomic or heteronomic relation to the Law of Truth; as endurance of some indeterminate limit which invites the inclusion (potentially) of everything and is at the same time overwhelmed by this everything, raising the question of how to include by not including.

They might for aught we could know have founderd during that awful night, and ourselves be the only survivors to tell the tale of woe. And we too might at any moment sink beneath this vast extent of ocean leaving scarcely a momentary buble to mark the spot or tell that we once was.

On our way to the death. So I'm saying that experience cleaves the witness, foregrounding both the split in the subject itself (inside/outside, consciousness/the unconscious, desire/enjoyment) as well as a rift between what can be made available for public attestation and something else, some secret testimony, evocative yet incomprehensible: "the boy's spirit left through its blue." The elements resulting from this cleavage are radically asymmetrical and incommensurable; they threaten to engulf each other and the subject, are ruinous to any simple transparency in truth-telling, and bring the word "experience" closer to the disaster secreted in its etymological root (L. *ex-periri*, to try or test, to lead over or cross something perilous). The witness, as he testifies, feels the hot flush of color in his cheeks; the possible pride he might feel in doing his duty gives way to embarrassment, or further, to something else.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 62-63 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Primo Levi (on the arrival of Russian soldiers at Auschwitz on 27 January 1945, the definitive mark of the prisoners' liberation): "They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime, at the fact that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defense."

Levinas: "What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves. It reveals not our nothingness but the totality of our existence… What shame discovers is the Being that discovers itself." (*De l'évasion*)

Shame is the lack of distance; too much intimacy, too much proximity, on our way to the death. It is precisely the lack of lack itself (our lack of lack of presence to ourselves). The subject has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own fracture, its own rivenness, its own oblivion as subject. A double movement, both subjectification and desubjectification: shame.

Having now consumed their last morsel of food the captain with his three surviving companions after a due consultation agreed to cast lots.

Levi: "It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother's Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say "us" in a much vaster, indeed, universal sense) has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead." (*The Reawakening*)

The flesh of those unfortunate men constituted the only food of the survivors whilst it lasted.

• • • • •

"If I make films instead of children, does that mean I'm less human?" (from *Soft and Hard* by Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville)

Father (not my father, but me, a father): "What is a catastrophe?"

Son (toothpick jauntily engobbed, eyes demonbright, gleeful): "Goddammit!"

Susan Howe: "Love changes besides he's / damned…" (*Pierce Arrow*)

Date: Sun, 23 July 2000 23:14:09 -0500 (CDT)
From:
To:
Subject: Re: your email

Dear M,

So what were MY reasons for wanting out of the situation? One reason was the atmosphere of gloom that permeated the household. Nothing ever seemed to create joy for you, and I was/am under the impression that to be happy is not one of your goals, and not one you would advocate for others.

Another reason is that I didn't see you taking much responsibility for your life—it always seemed to be up to me to make your life worth living. And as I've said before, I don't think that's an appropriate burden to put on another person, even if that person is your spouse. I felt very oppressed by the weight of that responsibility, and I don't think I'm one who takes the easy route. That is to say, I don't think I am a carefree, callous type who shirks accountability or responsibility, but I think what was being asked of me was unreasonable, and although I tried to take it on for a number of years, I just couldn't continue to do so. It was making me miserable.

I also felt that I was always on duty as caretaker, and that I never had an opportunity to be the sick one. It seemed to me that you were constantly complaining of not feeling





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 64-65 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

well—feeling old, etc., as if your life were over—and so I never got any relief. I always had to be well. Perhaps that's why I lost so much weight in the early months of this year: I was sick myself but didn't have much of an opportunity to be so and then recover. And although I'm turning 41 tomorrow, I certainly don't think my life is over. It's still in high gear, and I want to continue thinking in those terms until I'm on my deathbed.

Another thing that was very troubling to me was our inability to communicate. There were moments, far too many of them, when I felt as if we were from completely different planets. Your reasoning/logic seemed to me to be upside down, or skewed so that there was no way for me to respond to it. Except with silence… which you hated, and which I hated, too, but I could think of no words that were up to the task.

I feel ridiculous saying all of this, because I've said it all so many times before that it seems completely shop-worn.

Well, I'll continue nevertheless.

Yet another thing I felt quite acutely was the lack of action that we took. I can't blame this on you because I felt a kind of inertia myself, but I HATED it. This may be ego discourse speaking, but I think I am generally a person who likes to take action. If I say I want to do something, I'm not just blowing hot air. I do it. Damn it, you must remember that there were times when I'd say, "Let's do this, or let's do that," and you'd say, "Not now. We'll do it tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never came. I couldn't stand the paralysis… the procrastination… the dwindling hope that anything was EVER going to get done.





Anyway, I hope you're beginning to recover from the horror of these events. There really IS a way to put it into perspective, if you want to do that, and there really IS a way to think beyond the (stupid) confines of a (stupid) institution such as marriage. As someone once said, "Don't live in the penitentiary. Try bemusement." Or, as I might amend it, "Try laughing heartily at yourself and your predicament on occasion." In fact, that's what I'm trying to do.

love, B

Here she now lays, snatched untimely from her stateliness, into a mere shadow of what she was, and our selves deprived of the home which her goodly sides had so long afforded us.

Roland Barthes: "Whenever you give anybody anything to read, you are giving it to your mother."

Blanchot: "To be lost. To capsize." (*The Writing of the Disaster*)

Date: Wed, 23 Aug 2000 19:09:46 -0400
To: bmlaugh@southalabama.edu
From: mick@yhammer.com
Subject:

Last night I had a particularly horrible dream in which I came to Mobile to see Jazzbo. You had several people staying in the house, including a young girl whose hands did not function properly and which were supported/contained within a web-like contraption that moved the fingers for her. When I finally spotted Jazzbo he was standing with his back to me and wouldn't answer me when I called his name. I went up to him and turned him around to hug him, and he was limp and thin and pale and silent and wore glasses and had moist swollen lips on an impossibly large mouth; he looked like an infantile Stephen Hawking. I was so shocked at this I immediately woke up, relieved that it was a dream, but stayed awake the rest of the night feeling awful, both because I had invented this, and also because it somehow meant that he was lost to me forever.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 66-67 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

I don't know if I can stand this much longer. I have been thrown out because I no longer have any value as a husband or as a father. It's still not clear what I have done to deserve having this judgement passed on me, and while I rationally know that neither of its propositions are accurate, I nevertheless cannot avoid buying into its "truth," at least on some level. This is having very damaging effects. I do not know if I will ever see Jazzbo again, but I do know that I will not be permitted to participate, in any important way, in raising him; I will miss seeing and helping him grow and develop and learn and I will be deprived of the pleasure and heartache of all that those things entail (and I know what that pleasure and heartache is). I can't understand what I did that made this deprivation necessary, and I do not see how it can possibly be construed as "best" for me, or for Jazzbo, although I guess I can imagine how you might see it being in your interest, though the only reasons I can come up with for that pertain to some version of your symptomology.

For me, this is a disaster in the fullest sense. I have lost my bearings completely, am totally separated from the star that ought to guide me somewhere. I tried very hard to act and to be OK, and was able to do that for a while, but I've lost it now and I don't know how or if I'll find it again. If there is some inherent gratification in shipwreck, I must be wallowing in it. There is little doubt that the drive seeks its fullest satisfaction in annihilation.

To shake things up, to "jolt" out of paralysis, would seem to me to be a preservative act, an effort to keep something alive, to prevent its loss. It would not be the way one would describe the termination of a marriage, of a family, especially when a child is involved, and when one's feelings can still be described as "love." I think your rhetoric betrays your confusion as to what you've done or are doing. Not that this inspires me with any hope.

When will I see Jazzbo again? It's been 2 months, already too long in some people's minds. Upon whom does the onus reside to facilitate my seeing him? Given the distance, and my present circumstances, it seems like a pipe dream, a fantasy. Do I want to see him? Yes, I want to see him, hold him, talk with him, kiss him, and love him and keep him near me until he's

grown up. Is that going to happen? No. Why? Because you've decided it is better if it doesn't. Why? I don't know why.

Well, I don't know what to say beyond this. It's not easy to write anything. I'm not getting anywhere with the Phil thing, let alone writing to you. I can't sleep, I can't read because I can't see worth a damn. I can't stop crying so I'll just stop.

M

If I make children instead of films, does that mean I'm less inhuman?

The moment of inscription: I am in Buffalo in my tiny, boozesweat-besotted apartment, $325 a month including heat, of which there is either none or too much. It is Wednesday, 20 September, 2000, 7:34pm EDT. I'm listening to Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground" (1928), perhaps one of the greatest blues recordings ever made, in part because it's postmodern avant la lettre. If you don't believe me, listen to it. Like Babci, Johnson lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918, and he wrote at least two songs about it.

Marguerite Duras: *C'est un lieu de détresse, naufragé.*

I am way late with this, but I'm distracted again (I almost want to say, distracted in the etymological sense, i.e. torn limb from limb). Yesterday after work I made a tape for Jazzbo on which I read some stories, and sang a few songs. His favorites, since he was a baby, are "Death Letter Blues" by Son House ("I got a letter this mornin', how do you reckon it read? It say 'Hurry, hurry, you know the gal you love is dead.'"), "The Greenland Whale Fisheries," and "Lord Franklin," about the shipwreck in the Northwest Passage.

It is stunningly pointless to say that I miss him. Somehow writing this makes the anguish more acute, as if he is in some way implicated in the domain of filmmaking; as if making or even writing about films somehow demands writing or making films about him. I guess that's how it was with Sam too. Once James Benning stayed at our house in Hamilton, and Sam made him a picture, a city seen from a distance, with the caption "Keep your eye on the brown structure." When I went to visit

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 68-69 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Jim in New York a couple of years later, Sam's picture was still on his fridge. Did you know that the boy flailing the stick through the dewy field in *passing through* is Sam? I'm his da now, but then I was his daddy.

• • • • •

Memory is always construction; a remembering, a re-articulation (in every sense of the term) of pieces, fragments, members. In some sense it raises the problem of the psychoanalytic "primal scene:" the moment of trauma invented as pure construction. One's memory, what one remembers, becomes reified precisely as fact (*this* is what happened; I can testify), as the truth of the past, but it is everywhere and always founded upon, foundered by, the personal, the equivocal, the aleatory, the fictitious.

A certain fetishistic modality is apt to be entailed here in the visual domain of cinema, namely the instance of the (memory) image as such: plenitude, seamlessness, completion, talismanic charm, the maternal as ideal. The film essay, Hoffman's films, operate to oppose this entailment; they seek to remain open to the rents, fractures, the "torn formations" that the fetishistic is concerned to elide.

Now could be seen the pale and wan features, the wild and vacant stare thrown upon each other and ever and anon, turning to view the fast receding remnant of the hulk, which had borne us so gracefully over the bosom of the ocean, as though it were possible that she could yet relieve us from the fate that seemed to await us, until at last it sunk from our view beneath the horizon.

PH, speaking of *river*: "What ensued was the chaos of the trip."

A chaotic memory trip, this journey toward what will have been mourning accomplished, because it is one not undertaken solely within the register of the visible and the tranquility of the fetish. Hoffman's cinema frequently guides us in the direction of what is off-screen, beyond the dimension of the frame. "The possibility of mourning lies in the unseen." (PH) And we might add: in the silent, the unspeakable, the ungraspable, the foundered.

• • • • •





A distinctive feature of the film essay is that it gives its viewers access to a feeling of its "aboutness," but in such a way that any link between this "aboutness" and the manifest content of the film is broken, or at least seriously in question. Suppose I'm teaching a class dealing with, say, Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (which is, I would argue, a film essay and not in any way, except satirically, a nostalgic repetition of the "B" movie whose namesake it is), and I ask "What is this film about?" The inevitable student response will be some sort of plot rehearsal, and occasionally something involving a more synthetic rendering of the drama, but each of these begs the next question: "What is it *really* about?" The possible answers are manifold and varied, but all would demand a careful scrutiny of those elements of the film that are likely to be missed (that is to say, unrecognized as significant) by an unsophisticated viewer attending mainly to the "story" (for example, and not exhaustively: the framing of the narrative within the daughter's "what I did last summer" class presentation; Max Cady's invocations of Silesius, the Epistle to the Galatians, and "the book between Esther and Psalms;" the obviously fake wreck of the houseboat; the name of the houseboat: Moana, after the Flaherty film; the daughter's encounter with Cady as a theatre arts teacher; etc.) Once attention is drawn to these elements, viewers are able to re-encounter them with new zest; the multiple vectors of the film are opened to interplay with whatever each viewer can bring to bear of his or her own intellect, emotion, experience, history in a voyage of interpretation and understanding which is not necessarily terminable. While this might prove another "risky crossing," the subject is no longer wholly "at sea."

The question "What is the film about?" is not, in the case of the film essay, to be divorced from the questions "What does the film do?" and "What can its viewers do with it?"

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 70-71 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





• • • • •

"Where I was born, you filmed." (from *passing through/torn formations*)

A primal scene? Somewhere east of Bratislava, a young girl romps along a fenceline in a steep meadow. Grown men are reaping, then stand to chat as they hone their scythes. The sexual menace that pervades here is only exceeded when the child enters a field and confronts a bull.
The male gonad: testis, testicle (L. *testis*, a witness {to virility}).

On tape, the girl speaks the Czecho-Polish dialect of this polyglot land. Hoffman's mother translates, haltingly. "Where I was born, you filmed." This girl could be her doppelganger, retracing the ground that Susie Kaczmarzyk trod in her own girlhood: one apparently fraught with penury, upheaval, illness, accident, leading eventually to emigration. When Sue returns after the war, she suffers "a hole in my leg that wouldn't heal." One night she's awakened and obliged to dance the Cassock in her bedclothes before an audience of Russian soldiers. At the beginning of the film, Chris Dewdney's voice over black leader: "The layers came apart easily."

We had travelled about three hours over the meadows and through the woods toward the hunting grounds, when we heard the most dismal howling set up before us that can be imagined. We continued on our way untill we seemed to be approaching nearer and nearer the spot whence the dismal sounds came, when the two captains came to a full stop, looked at each other a few moments as though they wished to say something which each was ashamed to open first when they turned simultaneously around making good their retreat simply remarking that the walking was so bad and the sun so extremely hot they would return and take a cooler day for the excursion.

The menace of sexuality gives way to the disaster of engenderment. There was a huge boil on Babci's neck while she was pregnant with Wally, "the boy born at the cone of our time's most explosive moment." The notion is put forward that one could be poisoned by history in the name of justice. Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Like Blind Willie Johnson, Babci lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918. She wrote no songs, but contracted Parkinson's disease, the final stages of which she is suffering, comforted by her descendants, in the opening sequence of the film.

Wally, the wayward son, the blacksheep uncle, housebreaker, former deadbeat dad, accordion maestro, optics theorist, maven of the *mise-en-abyme*: "Are you taking a picture of us looking at the picture?... You're taking a movie of us watching a movie!" The mad genius constructor of the appalling "corner mirror," which corrects the lateral inversion of normal reflection, so that you can "see yourself the way others see you." He builds one as a gift for his daughter **********, the oddball spelling the result, she says, "of an identity crisis, I guess." We watch her struggle to put on her makeup, her womanchild face bisected by the bead of solder conjoining the mirror's two panes; the vertical split-screen reverberating the pop-psych "schizo" trace of schizophrenia, possibly her father's affliction. Can a virus be transmitted if you see yourself seeing yourself (*en-abyme*) the way others see you? There's an eating sequence in *Destroying Angel* shot up at Phil's farm where Wayne is making dinner for Phil and Marian. "In the early 90s there was still such a fear of casual infection, you know, he could cut himself and infect us, but instead there's only celebration."(PH) How would others see you seeing yourself see yourself as others see you if you ate the poison mushroom?

Phil's trip to the motherland: the stop at Dachau with Zvia, the brutal silence of the *Muselmänner* ghosts who haunt the place provoking a wince at his patronym; the sudden violence on the Czech train; the encounter with the foreign relatives, the photos and the drinking and the amiable smiles and the eager messages to Susie; the recording of the story of Karol and Uncle Janyk. Was this legend of patricide the cryptic point of trauma for these family members scattered across two continents and four generations, each one of them, as Rilke would have it, "wet with the spittle of fate?" Can the poison of our secret histories invade us and

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 72-73 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

operate within us—like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—until we are consumed? Who can be a burrower, a grubworm? Marian thought we must.

• • • • •

Susan Susie Sue Kaczmarzyk Hoffman translates an aunt's or cousin's account of Karol's murder of his father. The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap. She falters, hesitates; Neil Schmitz once told me that stuttering is a form of knowledge. There are "remains in her trembling speech. This is where our forgetting, and the things we care not to tell, come to reside."(PH) "And Karol shot Uncle Janyk seven times." The re-filmed black and white video image of Susie's face, distant, now close, closer, close-up, its motion slowed down, slower, slow, as she switches off the machine and turns aside in anguish. Who can watch this? Who can film this? What's the difference between filming a death, and a cinema that by its nature, as Cocteau said, "films death at work?" Why is it so compelling? Why can I look at it forever? How can it be that it affords me some kind of feeling of comfort and peace? Is there something beyond the border of the frame?

Géricault's painting usually known as *The Raft of the Medusa* was actually called by its author *Scène de naufrage*, Scene of Shipwreck. I remember the press of the crowd before that picture in a gallery of the Louvre nearly thirty years ago now. What is the attraction, the fascination, of that image of disaster? My friend Pedro can't abide reading about the holocaust, about the camps; he is too much assaulted by the ordinary human capacity for extraordinary brutality. Why do I go endlessly back to Claude Lantzman's *Shoah*, to Levi, to Elie Wiesel, and so many others? Is there an arcane sadistic enjoyment at stake when we witness scenes of shipwreck, maritime and otherwise, from positions of (I'll say relative) security? Would it be better to avert our eyes, stop up our ears? Do we or don't we put the camera down?

The constant and vivid lightning seemed to envelope us in a fearful blaze, and the awful thunder of an angry element threatened every moment our final extermination.

While on his deathbed, the maker of *Scène de naufrage* was asked to assess his masterpiece. He is said to have snorted with contempt: "*Bah, une vignette*!" Perhaps the unfortunate contemporary correlative of Géricault's

painting is former Niagara Falls, Ontario resident James Cameron's *Titanic*. (Would he be a candidate for inclusion in the Escarpment School?)

To be human: to lend a voice to the inhuman.

• • • • •

Polyglot girlchild reclines in summerwhite meadowbliss. Whitenight brightsky, hicon sunsparkled haystalks. Firephantom ghostgirl upjumps from supine girlbody. Nightbright shadowgirl fencescampers rhythmrunning. Emulsionslash colorbursts. Lyric, recuperative doppelganger. "I fell asleep and dreamed."

Early in *Kitchener-Berlin* there is an image of a backhoe with the word "Zeppelin" painted on its arm. Then… a countdown leader: "The Amateur Cinema League presents… The Voyage of the R-100: The Highway of Tomorrow or How One Makes Two." The "first Canadian surrealist film"(PH) features the trans-Atlantic voyage of a rigid airship, with twin brothers documenting the trip from the air and the planetary surface. The ship arrives in Canada, "safe at last." "Twin brother comes to visit me and finds me still dreaming." These twin brothers, staggering in their indistinguishability, seem to communicate by telepathy.

Later, a phantom form rises from a sleeping twin. "Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?" The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap.

The psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham describes the presence of the phantom as indicating the effects in the descendants of something that had inflicted catastrophe on the parents. The phantom is equivalent to the drive: it has no energy of its own; it pursues its work of disarray in silence; it eludes rationalization; it gives rise to endless circulation and repetition ("I don't have a drive to repeat.")(PH) If we are in possession of, or possessed by, the phantom, we are being haunted not by ancestral ghosts, but by our ancestor's secrets, the nature of which we do not know.

Sami Van Ingen, the great-grandson of Robert Flaherty, in *Sweep*: "What have I inherited?" The ancestral weight of Flaherty, maker of *Nanook of the North*, and perhaps only the most famous whiteman to go into the Canadian Arctic and impose his whiteness on it, has compelled

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 74-75 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Sami to retrace his great-grandfather's steps to "somehow get even with who I am."

The headlamps of miners emerging from the shaft; candles in a cave; cave drawings; dinosaurs; the miners again. Finally a little girl in a red dress, an extenuated image, a phantom, "slips into the emulsion."(PH) From the rocky meadowhills east of Bratislava, a generation or two ago? Or is she the remnant of my mother's secret, or your mother's? Or ours, twin brother?

Hoffman's cinema resides, is at home, with the chimerical, the phantasmatic, the spectral, the anomalous; its economy touches on the touch of the untouchable (and with Cézanne it can say: "with each touch, I risk my life.")

Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?

• • • • •

"Improbable accidents of an acausal nature, that is, meaningful coincidences, have entered the picture." (from *Sweep*)

PH: "The only guide I've had in my filmmaking are these so-called coincidences."

Blanchot: "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental." (*The Writing of the Disaster*)

This day the wind has hauled to east south east, with torrents of rain falling, and at midnight had increased to an awful gale with a frightful sea, which seems to threaten our total annihilation.

The moment of inscription, 2: in *Sweep*, Christopher Herodier, hotel manager and sometime second-unit cameraman, makes an offer to Sami and Phil. "Here are two pens. Write a story about me!" Herodier is a Cree filmmaker (*Chiwaanaatihtaau Chitischiinuu*) who understands, along with his French counterpart Robert Bresson, that cinema (even a cinema such as this which seemingly privileges decoupage) is precisely cinematography, a writing. But under whose authorship? And what could authorship be?

Herman Melville: "The names of all fine authors are fictitious ones."

Richard Kerr, Jim McMurray, Rup Chand, Conrad Dubé, Mark, Dan, Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Peter Greenaway, John Grierson, Tucker Zimmerman, Chris Dewdney, Babci, Driououx, Walter Kaczmarzyk, Sue Hoffman, Uncle Janyk, Karol, Saugeen, Karol Witoya, Dent Harrison, Twin Brother, Richard Massey Williams, Gerry Shikatani, Robert Flaherty, Dante, Sami Van Ingen, Christopher Herodier, Wayne Salazar, Mickey, Marian McMahon. Phil Hoffman. Boneyard of names.

"The taut spring wound tightly tight. Tight." (from *?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*)

• • • • •

PH on *Chimera*: "The film doesn't insist that market people in Cairo's Khan Khalili and London's Portabello are the same, but that they share an energy related to colour, shape and form. That's why some of the film is abstract, to evoke these pleasures of sharing."

Melville: "Masonry—and is it man's? The lines of stone do not seem like courses of masonry, but like strata of rocks… These are the steps Jacob lay at."

Chimera: cinema of intercontinental ballistic single-frame zooms, a film with no author at all, Hoffman suggests. A striking moment: Marian, sunshaded, in front of an Egyptian pyramid. Two modes of preservation, care for the departed. The layers come apart easily. "A terrible mixture of the cunning and the awful. It was in these pyramids that the idea of Jehovah was born."(Melville, *Journals*)





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 76-77 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

"Do you chance to look out? Can you make a different picture? Image yourselves into a place that lets you speak to each other, and to others, more closely?" (from *Sweep*)

And if you do look out, what sort of look could it be? Neither a furtive glance, nor a close perusal, nor a wideband scan, nor a lonely mast-head watch by night; but let's say a reconnaissance. A risky crossing into enemy territory, a clandestine witnessing, a cracking of codes, a theft of secrets, perhaps the hard won validation of information already possessed. Reconnaissance: exhaustively translated as a knowing again that we are born together. Where I was born, you filmed. To evoke these pleasures of sharing. Marian thought we must.

Jacques Derrida: "Any testimony testifies in its essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof." (*Demeure*)

Dewdney: "You are splashed by the other children, but move not." (from *passing through/torn formations*)

• • • • •

Howe: "Peace thereafter / Rest fathom over"

Pace Wayne Salazar, not peace before we die, but peace thereafter—so that not we, but rather our secrets, don't haunt the living after we're gone. "The dead carry on longer than the living, and it seems that the force of a life lived is stronger once it ceases to exert itself… its silence and mystery… majestic." (PH)

Rest fathom over. Marian thought we must.





I can testify.

Melville, Moby-Dick: "So help me Heaven, and on my honor the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true. I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney." (*Moby-Dick*)

"I've never seen a whale." (Richard Kerr in *The Road Ended At the Beach*)

The gusts of wind were very hard and the night very dark, but our little whaleboat glided away like a thing of life.

• • • • •

NOTES

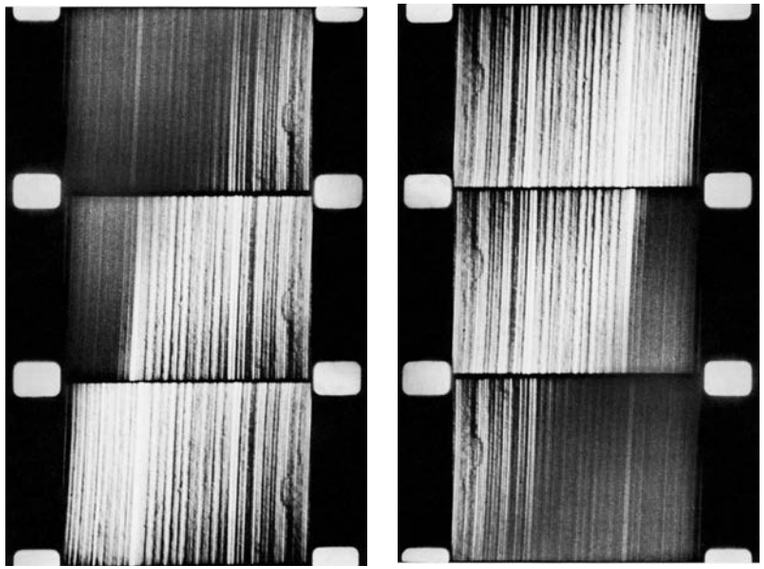
[The passages in italics are from the *Desultory Sketches of Thomas Nickerson* (1876) who, at fourteen, was the youngest crew member of the whaleship Essex, stove and sunk by a sperm whale in the south Pacific, 20 November 1820.]

(Originally published in *Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the films of Philip Hoffman*, ed. Mike Hoolboom/Karyn Sandlos, 2000)

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 78-79 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Experience Torn to Shreds / Experiments From the Granary

1992



…two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides, and the Holocaust—have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the "I think"… doing its utmost, to reassemble the fantastic images of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82.5: "All foundations of the earth are shaken."

Emmanuel Levinas

dream delivers us to dream

As in a dream, I remember one warm summer night in Chicago, a few years ago. It was near dark, Vincent Grenier and I sat on his porch drinking a beer and chatting. And through the gaps between the buildings in front of us could be seen heard felt a large urban intersection, the confluence of several busy streets, the frequent blare of car horns and vocal chords, the palpable swelter of city heat. (I give these details in hopes of delivering to the reader an oneiric picture.) Slung crazily on the façade of a bank, an electronic sign blipped its version of time and temperature, each serenely inaccurate. The sign then, and its memory now, put me in mind of Lacan's account of a similar scene in 1966, his description of Baltimore in the early morning as "the best image to sum up the unconscious." During our conversation, Vincent told me of his admiration for Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and the importance it holds for his own work.

that cryptic might

Testament of fracture, fractured testimony; fragments of witnessing and the bearing of witness. I invoke this picture that it might lie, encrypted, in the back of the reading I take here, and that it might come to animate (privately, secretly) that difficult circulation between viewers and films that we can call a cinematic reading (vision, but also scrutiny; hearing, but also listening: to witness.) A reading which, in Blanchot's words, "is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty—at bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend." And with anguish, a certain grief.

I grieve that grief can teach me nothing

But it is the process that is crucial. Precisely the experience, if we understand this word etymologically as trial or test, a perilous crossing. Grenier's films experiment with the experience of others, their difficult acts of memory or let us say, remembering; gathering together the errant fragments of something that was, that will not be again, and rearticulating them (that is, in speech) as members of something else, something that is. Or better, that will be.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 80-81 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

the capital exception

I will say that the singularity of Grenier's approach lies first in its refusal to accord any transparency to the presentations of the speakers, or to the cinematic (re)presentations of their speech. For the making of these films is also a rearticulation, a speaking of experience; and the same sorts of obscurely potent and embedded particularities that make, for each one of us, the peculiar drift of our speaking peculiarity our own, constrain the maker too, and so the work. The second mark of exception would be that these complications pertain to the experience of the viewer as well.

I do not make it; I arrive there

So that the notion of the maker as intentional, deliberate, mastering comes to be tempered (at the very least) by the perils (accidental, spontaneous, unmasterable) of his own experience. (I think of Lacan's account of his theoretical procedure in *Seminar XI*: "I do not seek, I find.") What's available is gathered up, put to the test, subjected to experiment by one who is himself in process, on trial. (Perhaps he could say, with Melville's Ishmael: "I am the architect, not the builder.") And the work takes shape, and shape again in the shaping of each viewer who risks a leap.

In this our talking America

They are talking, everywhere and always, about loss. In *I.D.* Joanne has lost her job (perhaps her dignity); Milton's parents have lost their home and possessions, and he his breath; Steve recounts Harpo's death (and where is his brother Sean?); Gayle talks about the Prisoner who has lost his name. Lisa's story in *You* is of a failed love affair, and Dan in *Out in the Garden* has lost his future. What is remarkable is the powerful passivity with which they speak in the face of loss, the passion not only of what they say, but of how they say it, how they behave as they speak. They all perform a labor, let's say a work of mourning. The losses of which they speak amount finally to loss of self, and this labor of speaking, this coming to terms with loss becomes an effort to find oneself again, to remember oneself.

where do we find ourselves?

Precisely at a loss, and everywhere and always. Every recovery from loss is a gathering, through speech, of those scattered remnants which happen to hand, and which we sort through (as if to separate kernel from husk) and piece together as experience in which we find ourselves again, and anew. But every new experience of self risks new perils, and the price of recovery of self is the inevitable need to recover it again. The question "who am I?" can (must) only be answered again and again, and only partially, in fragments. Every finding of an answer entails its failure, and the question must be broached anew in a speaking (we could say, dialectic) that is not terminable.

All our blows glance, all our hits are accidents

I come back to Grenier's approach. Blows (I mean the way the maker approaches) glance because they are observations, they bear witness. Hits (I mean the character of the observations, the cinematic articulation) are accidents because they are not essences. He finds what comes to hand, picks it up, uses it in his own (peculiar, particular) way. Take the amazing segment from *Out in the Garden* in which Dan's face as he talks is reflected in (in a way, superimposed upon) a framed photograph that seems to be several decades old. The man depicted could be Dan's father or grandfather, but he's young in the photograph, younger than Dan, wears a collar and tie and a confident, maybe even smug, expression. Dan is speaking about being HIV positive, about how concerned people are, about the pity he reads in straight people's faces, how they seem to confer a death warrant upon him, how he wishes they weren't so concerned. His face (its reflection) is distorted by the imperfections of the glass in the photo frame. Sometimes the two faces seem to merge into a composite, sometimes one or the other grasps our attention. A stunning range of oppositions is set up: youth/middle-age; confidence as to the future/hopelessness in the lack of a future; a movement, in the past, toward the future (to be experienced)/a movement, in the present (now past) toward the past in search of experience (to be remembered, to be missed): paternity, engenderment, generation/filiation, non-engenderment, end of generation; straight/gay; clarity/distortion. (I am not being exhaustive.) All of this can be found in the found image/segment, but it founds no essential or immanent meaning. It can be given (it gives itself) only and precisely to be read, and meaning can be conferred upon it only retroactively (and only inconclusively).

everything looks real and angular

This process (trial, test, experiment) of approach by indirection, as if taking an (accidental, not deliberate) angle on things, is relentless in these

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 82-83 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

films. Dan almost never speaks on camera directly; Instead we see him hear him through a window which reflects the bare branches of a tree, as a shadow on a patio, in a mirror, and so on. In *I.D.*, Gayle speaks off-camera in the *Prologue*, Nadra is caught in extreme close-up (her hands, the back of her head), Steve is reflected in a mirror (or his reflection is blacked by his interlocutor). Milton talking about his parents is superimposed on Milton talking about his asthma attack, the two soundtracks competing for dominance. All of this angularity, this indirection requires that some direction through (let's say, across) the film has to be found by the viewer in his or her own way, should that way be risked.

Like a bird which alights from nowhere

So many oddities of Grenier's mode of cinematic articulation (call it a language, a way of speaking: I continue to insist) simply invite us to be struck (not a glancing blow, a hit!); I mean impressed, moved. In *You*, what seems to be a double image of Lisa swims and glitters on the surface of some ocean, as she tells the story of the Porsche driver with the baseball bat. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a stick emerges from the bottom of the image, and then two feet. The stick stirs the water and we have to rethink (re-experience?) what we've just seen (and what we've just heard?), and work out (is it possible?) what we've witnessed. Find something, lose it, refind (passively, passionately) something new again.

we thrive by casualties

Pushing this a bit further, this stunning double reflection of Lisa I mean, we can see (from this distance, retroactively, that is) how casually apt it is. There are two reflections, and there are two Lisas: she speaks (she remembers) and she writes (we know not what): there is Lisa now (she is speaking) and Lisa then (she is spoken). The displacement at work here is extensive: Lisa now (speaking) is Lisa then (being filmed) but also Lisa as she will always be (on film); but Lisa on film will never be apprehended fully the same way twice by any viewer. (The potential for vertigo is immense in trying to think this through.) Also doubled is the "you" to whom Lisa speaks, who is presumably her real ex-lover, but whose position, because of the pronoun, the viewer can't avoid taking up to some extent. And with that identification comes the threatening aggressivity in Lisa's address.

these beautiful limits

At the beginning of *You*, Lisa talks about her fear of going to the movies with "you" because of the danger of one of "your" excessive responses to people talking during the film. We see her partially hidden behind a large shaft that's part of some sort of machinery, the cogs and wheels of which, and the flickering light in which it's bathed, are suggestive of a movie projector. You (I mean you the viewer) are in fact at the movies, watching this film. Maybe somebody's talking rudely nearby. Maybe you'd like to take a swipe at him. There are plenty of invitations in the film (and in the others) for identification, but also plenty of operations (non-synchronous sound, rapid cutting, bizarre images, aggressivity) which undermine it. What is crucial in these films that stress the absolute particularity (I'd even say the potential unintelligibility) of a person's experience (and his or her means of speaking it) is their profound openness to the relation of interchange between viewer and film, identification will frequently be gratified but just as frequently blocked; the viewer can suffer (as a passion, I'll say) this blockage, will experience it as a loss, and can be changed by it; and the viewer can then return to the film to find a different articulation of the blockage or passage of identification in a process (trial, experiment, experience) potentially interminable. A dialectic, that is, which, in its itinerant circulation around the question of identity, exerts upon it (for viewer and maker both, I'd say) a destabilizing force.

we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans

Or, we must say with Blanchot, at "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs." We are lost, we capsize, we meet the limit which would sublimely overwhelm us, but find ourselves anew again, recovered on board the devious-cruising bark of experience newly remembered: passage for another risky crossing.





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 84-85 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture

In these remarks I've privileged Grenier's most recent films, his "talking pictures." While I'd be unwilling to propose any developmental saga, I can (sketchily) suggest some features of the early work that are pertinent to the late. The delicate luminous illusions tested in *While Revolved and Closer Outside* resurface in *I.D.* and *You*, reflecting the illusory identities at stake there. *Interieur Interiours* sets up a kind of feminine topology (of the fold, say: a kind of chiastic crossover of inside with outside), a spatial erotics resonant with Lisa's doubled (maybe inverted) image in *You*, and with the use of superimposition in *I.D.*. *World in Focus* opposes mapping, the finding of direction, to indirection (focal articulation), and suggests, through its investigation of the book, that finding oneself, one's place, has something to do with reading. More generally, the early films exhibit (uncannily) the uncanny domesticity so crucial to the later work.

ghostlike we glide

D'Apres Meg foregrounds the uniqueness of human gestures as a pre-verbal mode of expression (call it a speaking). And I will say that *Time's Wake (Once Removed)* marks the transition to the "talkies" in its shifting from the domestic to the familiar (the family, but also the sense of ghostly companion: it is that sort of wake too). Composed of fragments of what seem to be "home movies", and using many of the formal elements of the work that succeeds it, *Time's Wake*, despite its silence, establishes a (ghostly) discourse inexorable and mournful in its drift as the icepack in the St. Laurence.

I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me

I cannot apologize for the personal, peculiar (not to say perverse) character of my remarks. My account has been of the work of my friend, my Vincent Grenier, as I experience, as I think and speak it and him. It has no





authority but my meager own. If I have (perhaps unfashionably nowadays) made him Emersonian, it is because I read him as sharing the complex and ethical approach of Emerson's "Experience" to "this new yet unapproachable America." This approach, this experience (experiment), is mournful and recuperative and renewing; it is torn, in fragments; it shakes the foundations of the earth. (I could have spoken of its mystical character, risking everything.) It is nothing without its peril. Somebody's always liable to come after you with a baseball bat.

we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them

If Vincent has a Hitchcockian cameo in his films, it can only be the masked and crazylimbed skater in *D'Après Meg.*

we dress our garden

So many gardeners in these films: Meg, Milton, Dan; even Lisa tends a watery garden. A familiar (uncanny?) metaphor: Eden, America. A garden could also be a cemetery, or that wild growth that overruns the site where a concentration camp used to stand. We dig and dress, we prune and tend and cultivate; or we simply stand and mark the place, observing the grasses and wildflowers and the few remaining broken scorched bricks. Tending, attendance; a labor, a duty. And sometimes we can, as Vincent Grenier can, stoop down and separate the corn from the dross, gather it up and store it in the granary. Our sustenance over a hard winter. Our seed for spring.

NOTES

"Simulacra: The End of the World" (tr. David Allison) in David Wood (ed.) *Writing the Future.* London: Routledge, 1990 p. 12.

"Of Structure as an inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever" in Donato and Mackey (eds.) *The Structuralist Controversy.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970 p.189.

The Writing of the Disaster by Maurice Blanchot (tr. Ann Smack) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986 p10.

The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan (ed. J-A Miller) (tr. Alan Sheridan) New York: W W Norton & Co., 1977 p. 7.

The Writing of the Disaster p. 112.

The headings of each of these paragraphs are extracted from Emerson's essay.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 86-87 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Stet

2002

It means "let it stand."

Without explanation, for now. Instead, let me oblige you to indulge in the fantasy of a moment of inscription: imagine Phil Hoffman darkly embunkered in his digital basement, bringing to fruition several years' hard work on his cinematic response to Marian's death, a task whose already formidable cargo is further laden by an apprehensive public, friends and colleagues (and critics?) poised in anticipation, festival spotlight in the offing, book in preparation; and there is a deadline! And now consider that upstairs the bright world teems—new loves, new job, new life abundant, loud, alive, living on, waiting for Phil to join in, to live there too.

Under these conditions, how is the work of mourning even possible? How possible is the making of the work mourning demands? How could one manage the intimacy required, or the courage, or the vulnerability, or the generosity? How could one avoid distraction, and I mean "being torn limb from limb." How could one endure the thought of all the scrutiny about to ensue? To say that the task would be daunting is hardly adequate. It would have to be unbearable.

Fortunately, we're only fantasizing.

Merely daunting is the present task (an altogether different sort of fantasy): what sort of address is possible toward a work so personal, so charged with grief, so apparently non-political as Hoffman's *What these ashes wanted*, and how can it meet the demands of its venue, a magazine about cinema but also about action, whose name inscribes a certain militancy, a politics? How can one avoid the temptation to offer a respectful bromide, especially given the tragic loss out of which the film is built. Is it possible to wish to celebrate this filmmaker, his films, this film, and yet meet the work critically, engage it politically? I don't know the answer to any of these questions.





The last time I wrote about Phil's work, I employed the device of having an imaginary conversation take place as a sort of preface to the piece.[1] I think I was trying to be entertaining. In it, I used an expression that has wide currency among (mainly white) people in the deep south, where I was living at the time. It's an instance of what my friend Neil Schmitz would call "confederate discourse." I wrote: "I might could have a twin brother." Not surprisingly, a copy editor figured that I'd neglected to delete either the might or the could, and so deleted one of them for me. When I got the edited copy, I wrote "Stet" in the margin, and appended an explanation of the usage.

So when the book came out, and the deletion remained unstetted (yup, that's a word), I was hotter, as the Mobile gumbo-queens might say, than a black roux on a high flame. Editors were decried, publishers slandered. In retrospect, one sees how these things can happen, that nobody's to blame. Pressure of deadline. Mere oversight. Might could happen this time, too. But I hope not.

I like this phrase, this "might could," because it seems to combine (or let's say "confederate") notions of capability, possibility and intention, while subsuming them under the sign of doubt. It's not reducible merely to the sum of its parts; instead its meaning is disturbed by something which strictly is not part of it. It offers something while taking it back; it withholds while revealing. The statement "I might could help you clean up that kitchen" means, or could mean, something like "I'm quite willing and would like to help you clean up that kitchen, but only if you agree to it, I don't want to insist, not that you'd really need help anyway." There's a sense in which it's a more sociable, even more ethical idiom. At the same time, an advantage of "might could" lies in its ability to veil just about any assertion with a moderate ambiguity, and to leave the speaker

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 88-89 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

at a certain remove from whatever he asserts, from any proposition about whose status he may not be entirely secure; not quite taking him off the hook, but leaving him a bit of squirming room, so that he may get off it eventually should he squirm to sufficient effect. Given that, consider what these statements might convey (or dissemble): I might could like to try that gumbo; I might could make a film about losing a loved one; I might could never forget you; I might could love you always.

You might could get it by now.

So to come, at last, back to the raft: despite my inability to answer the questions I posed above, I propose to carry on, insufficiently, with my merely daunting task to address, in this place, on this occasion, Hoffman's *What these ashes wanted*, but to do so under the rubric (if there can be such a thing) of the "might could."

To do so, and then to let it stand.

Here's one way of putting it: when a loved one dies, a hole opens up in the Real. A flood of images rushes in, as if to fill the gap. Mourning would work (might could work?) to marshal those images, to subject them, with no guarantee of success, to some form of symbolic constraint in a process not necessarily terminable since that gap, that hole, will have a persistence. In any case, we have a difficult, uncomfortable, unstable articulation of psychic registers: Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. The subject is in disarray, adrift, at risk even. Disastered, he no longer knows where to look to find the star that ought to guide him; no longer can he rely on familiar locators to let him know who it is that he takes himself to be. Is it any wonder that Freud described the process of mourning, with its dramatic intensity and hallucinatory hypercathexes, as resembling psychosis?

In her commentary on an earlier version of the film, Brenda Longfellow makes an astute point concerning the issue of the other's inscription in cinema.[2] Speaking of the sequence of Phil and Marian in the car as Marian makes her visiting nurse rounds, Longfellow writes:

> …she confronts Phil (hiding behind his heavy 3/4-inch camera in the back seat), accusing him of not understanding how difficult it is to be filmed and how much the camera mediates and makes strange their relation. It is an important moment precisely because it honours the otherness of the other….[I]t anchors Marian in her lifeworld not simply as an image, idol or memory, but as a sensate and intentional subject in her own right, and one, furthermore, who explicitly defies the naturalness of a camera recording her image.[3]

There is another aspect to this sequence, however. Marian's complaint quite forcefully registers a valorization of the psychological (her feelings of unease regarding her place in front of the camera) over the physical (Phil's struggle with the heavy camera), a notion that she seems to regard as transparently the case, but whose validity hardly goes without saying; certainly it could be subject to dispute (to say the least, given the brute sovereignty of the physical in the region of illness leading to death). In addition, her protestations are a little excessive ("Oh Philip, you're nuts! You really are nuts! Sometimes I think you're so insensitive, really!"); once he explains, she becomes rather condescending, speaking to Phil as if he's a bit of a nob ("Well, that's a little different, you know. Do you understand the difference?"). Now it's true that all of this is carried on with good humor, and I'm not about to embark onto the terrain of how couples work out their private modes of communication. My point is that here and occasionally elsewhere, the film accords Marian some over-exposure, allows her to be presented in what may be other than the best light. Besides the idealization and aggrandizement of the lost other that might be expected, this film permits a certain aggressivity or even hostility to be advanced in her direction. That this may be so need not be seen as a weakness; it may be a sign of inconsistency or contradiction on the part of the maker (though I might could rather not speculate as to the specific operations of his psyche), but that would be something worth registering since it's something to which we are all likely to be subject. And that we are permitted to recognize Marian as some kind of imperfect creature, whether as a result of the irruption of someone's aggressivity or no, is part of the film's value; it provides a bit of purchase from which to resist (and to recognize the need to resist) the tendency to mythologize the lost loved one, to obliterate her faults, to reduce her in elevating her to the level of the ideal.

A black dog at loose ends, standing on a sidewalk; a kid on a front stoop conducting an imaginary orchestra (or is he a filmmaker quelling an applauding crowd at some festival awards ceremony?) This might could be what mourning is.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 90-91 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





Though I met her the same day Phil did, I never had any extensive first hand experience of Marian as an intellectual, writer or artist. But I do remember an afternoon a year or two after they got together. Phil was out somewhere, and Marian and I talked for a few hours. I was going through some kind of a bad patch, as they say. She was generous and encouraging. I think it was the last time I spoke with her for more than a minute or two. I left that kitchen feeling quite uplifted, a feeling which lasted for some time afterwards.

> What these ashes wanted, I felt sure,
> was not containment but participation.
> Not an enclosure of memory,
> but the world.

The key phrase in the film's epigraph (something which Marian had extracted from the work of American poet Mark Doty) is the "I felt sure." Participation and the world rather than containment or enclosure (or incorporation) is not the other's desire, but arises within the bereaved. It is the mourner who does not wish to be enclosed (trapped, embunkered) within or by his memory of the lost loved one; the "I felt sure" operates to project these wishes onto the departed, concealing, in what would appear to be a gesture of generosity or sacrifice, a flight from or defense against the affect, anxiety, which threatens him on account of what may not be loss, but rather, excessive proximity. Photography, and thus cinema, always functions in the mode of bereavement (recall Benjamin, Bazin, Barthes, et al.); making a film such as this one, making it public, is a way of securing this projection, a way of keeping this (projected) pact with the other, and at the same time an effort at underwriting one's own defense. Thus Benjamin's beloved Kafka: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds."[4]





This kind of "I felt sure" (under the sign of which the film proceeds) precisely bears the sense of the "might could."

In the sequence featuring a photograph from Guadalest, Spain, whose "dark surround" may house Marian's "after image," the on-screen text continues:

> if I could brighten up this part of the picture
> I might illuminate
> the condition of her death
> the mystery of her life
> and the reason why
> at the instant of her passage
> I felt peace with her leaving
> a feeling I no longer hold.

Here it is in precisely the place of no information (the blank, silver-free part of the negative that allows all light to pass, thus giving black on the print) that the other, and the answer to her enigma, is sought. It is as if the subject knows without knowing that there is a constitutive failure inherent in his project, that it must fail in order to in any sense succeed: that is, to relinquish, to recuperate, to remain, to remember. And that photography (or cinematography) has a necessary relation to that necessary failure. In the mode of bereavement. I felt sure.

Her snow dance, the second version, black and white, high-contrast. The scratches, dirt and hair, visible splices, the slow bleachout as she skips away. This might could be what mourning is.

In the section called "Four Shadows," an apostrophe to Marian (but which also, by its second person address, implicates, ensnares, the viewer),

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 92-93 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Hoffman replays a series of chance encounters with death experienced "not long before you died." Crucial here is the figure of Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh, whose presence in the film implicitly but nevertheless forcefully identifies her with Marian. Because she was a woman, and to prevent her from living on in eternity, Hatshepsut's name had been written out of Egyptian history, her image defiled, her body robbed from its tomb. And yet her story and her name have been recovered, her image reclaimed; now there's a website promoting a biopic called "The Daughter of Ra"; the other day, Phil told me he'd heard that archeologists think they may have found her mummy at a recent dig. Hatshepsut oscillates, then, between presence and absence; her cartouche is both erased and legible; her crypt is empty and it isn't. A strong, active woman (socially, intellectually, artistically), Marian had a pharaonic bearing; we might could say that in the film (the figure of) Marian is borne in the same oscillation as her ancient avatar, but with a twist. Neither presence nor absence, but some remnant, a something-other-than, is encrypted here; or better, resides here cryptically: that is, available, should we be up to it, for decipherment.

Two kids discussing an infestation of ladybugs, and the different varieties among the swarm. One relates an accidental squishing, to general amusement. This might could be what mourning is.

Your death is only available to me as your absence or as my loss. You are gone, outside me, and are now nothing since I am consigned to memory, to mourning, to interiorization. But this death that I cannot know, your death (or my own?), makes my limit apparent in my obligation to mourn, to remember, and thus to harbor within me something that exceeds me, is other than me, and is outside me: a remnant of your intractable absent otherness. In me without me, your trace. Without which no "in me" at all, no within to me. Your absence, irrevocable, carves me out, hollows me, leaves me with your trace, which is other than you. Else but that other, I relinquish. What remains, non-totalizable, non-composable, is fragment, scrap, ort, morsel. Them I savor, mourning.

Hoffman's practice is to work with leftovers, scraps, and the mode of his work is fragmentary. His approach is from the margins, and features the marginal: this grandmother; that body on a Mexican road; this twin and his brother; this one, this very one I loved, lost. It can be excruciating at times. There are even occasional bits that stick in the craw, refuse to be processed (for me, this time: Hasselhoff.) But in general, what it

preserves, harbors, secretes, what opens in it, what swoons and ranges and percolates and dodges in this broad corpus is surprising, rich and deep. The work exceeds itself, is more than what it's made from, and becomes itself its own trace, its own remnant. Available for decipherment. At a theatre (not terribly) near you.

More Egyptology: during the filming at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, the zoom barrel on Hoffman's lens jams, we are told, and later the camera stops working altogether. What gorgonizing Medusa's gaze has come within its field of view? It is not absence that makes the dead so disturbing to encounter (Hoffman's claim that each of his encounters made death "less strange" doesn't seem to me altogether plausible given the details); it's that the dead are somehow all too present, even too enjoying, we might say. Instead of lack, we come into contact with a lack of lack, a non-positive over-abundance exceeding our capacity to grasp it, and it provokes a petrifying anxiety. I might could make a film about a lost loved one, but to do so means that the apparatus itself will stiffen and break, that what I wish to record will utterly resist presentation; and it turns out that I can (and perhaps should) only avert my gaze, and in so doing merely mark the (lacerating) place/trace of what was to have been my subject.

The brilliant poetic reduction of the young Polish cousin in passing through/torn formations *("Where I was born, you filmed") re/deformed here (chiasmatically; under erasure perhaps) as "You filmed, whereon my trace was born(e)." This might could be what mourning is.*

One of a number of beautiful, singular and compelling images in the film: sunlit Marian walking behind a line of columns at a temple of Horus, image replaced by shadow, not-presence and not-absence, and trace. A haunting. Mike Hoolboom's voice on the answering machine, delivering another potshard, a find from his dig: "In a later century, someone dropped and broke the cup, but it was too precious simply to throw away. It was repaired, not with glue, but with a seam of gold solder; and I think our poems are often like that gold solder, repairing the break in what can never be restored, perfectly. The gold repair adds a kind of beauty to the cup, making visible part of its history."

It's a comforting story, but there's another version: you might could never gather up all the pieces; one or two wind up down the cold air return or the sinkdrain, never to re-emerge. Some bits are so tiny you can't

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 94-95 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





see to pick them up; eventually they're carried away by swarms of ladybugs. The molten gold solder drips on your hand, searing into your flesh, working its way through your system till it's lodged in your hot heart. The cup is repaired with Scotch tape and rubber bands, and you put it at the back of a shelf. Every time you happen to see it you're stiffened with an anxious rigor, and look away. This, too, is part of history. Is it visible?

Now think of Auden's meditation on Breughel's Icarus in "Musée des Beaux Arts" (with the son of Daedelus a figure both of the lost loved one and the artist who tempts the limits of the possible, flying too close to the sun):

> …how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
> But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
> Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

New loves upstairs, loud alive in the brightteeming day. This might could be what mourning is.

Perhaps in *What these ashes wanted* we have seen (at least the remnant of) something amazing.
We might could sail on. And in the wake of the final frame, one word:

Stet.

It means "let it stand."

NOTES

1. Mike Cartmell, "Landscape With Shipwreck" in *Landscape With Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman*, ed. K. Sandlos and M. Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2001, pp. 222-244.
2. Brenda Longfellow, "Philip Hoffman's Camera Lucida" in *Landscape With Shipwreck*, pp. 201-210.
3. Ibid., p. 207.
4. In *Gustav Janouch, Gespräche mit Kafka*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1968, p. 54.

(Originally published in *CineAction* Number 57, 2002)

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 96-97 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

I Come Here For The Rites Of Your Unworlding

2008



A man is crossing a desert. He is crossing the desert, and he is alone. He is riding a camel, alone, crossing the vastest desert in the world.

• • • • •

He is crossing the desert. His journey terminated by police in eastern Chad, due to the risk of fighting nearby, he finds himself drawn to the hospital. Drawn, he says, "to the struggle of life over death." Surgeons treat a person wounded in the conflict, and perform a rather perfunctory C-section, hauling an infant by the throat into the world. The child would be about eighteen now, if indeed it has survived the inexhaustible brutality of a world in which the category "children" intersects massively the category "victim."

And the category "killer."

This sequence occurs in a section of *Life Without Death*, the title of which powerfully resonates for a viewer in 2008: "El Fasher, Sudan"—the capital of North Darfur. No doubt children are being rudely born there too. Reaching El Fasher will for the first time lead him outside the Sahara, because taking the outside route will be more hazardous, and thus he "must take it, on principle." This is one of the marks of the resolve and determination which anger and frustrate local officials, and which he bears as a point of pride. Whatever waiver is necessary, he will gladly sign it. Danger will not cow him; it is precisely what he seeks, what the journey is about. Going outside the Sahara is beside the point because the Sahara is beside the point.

• • • • •

It has not been easy to write about the film of the man crossing the desert.

• • • • •

I see a word approach the desert.
It is not the word Sky or the word Earth. Neither the word Sand nor the word Seed, but the word Nothing, the word Void.
The desert confides only in the desert.
You realize and you do not realize you are disappearing.
(after Edmond Jabès)

• • • • •

A man is crossing the desert. I wish I could see him as a mythic creature, embodying the universal, containing multitudes.

In Niger he receives an unexpected note from a French soldier (a Legionnaire?) stationed somewhere in the area. Its telling locution, improbable in address, impossible of response: "I hope you're alive." If only it were that simple.

I repeat the beau geste of its salutation, and call him "Franck."

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 98-99 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

And Franck declaims:
I disappear as a camelpath.
I flatten as a desiccated carcass.
I carry the ashes.
I am lost and guide the lost.
I am vacuous as the featureless landscape.
I go on ahead.
I sleep apart, alone.

• • • • •

Once another man, a younger man, a very young man barely become a man, was crossing a much smaller desert. He rode an old beat-up bus not a camel. I was that man, and can recount my own paltry desert experience: somewhere between Lashkar Gah and Qandahar in Afghanistan, the bus had stopped at a watering hole, an oasis you might say, and everybody else had gotten off to relieve themselves, to get a drink or to stretch their legs. I don't know why but I stayed where I was, on a seat at the very back. It was ridiculously hot. A man appeared at the front of the bus and began to move slowly toward me.

Perhaps because of the heat, perhaps because it was Afghanistan, the rest of this, actions and thoughts, seemed to take place over a weirdly extended duration, as if in slow motion. I supposed that the man was a beggar. This was a rote response; beggars would get on the bus at every stop. But this man was different. He was dressed in blue, almost a skyblue (certainly not typical), his dhoti and turban were very clean (unusual for a beggar) and of fine fabric, silken, almost shimmering. He wore a blue silken cloth, a kind of veil, over the entirety of his face. The cloth was or seemed to be slightly moist. He came slowly down the aisle. There was a dawning double recognition that the man was about to show me what was under the cloth, and that I did not want to see it. My field of vision began to narrow and darken. I felt a swell of anxiety. I fished in my pocket for whatever change I had, and held it out at arm's length, saying something—pointless, pathetic—in hopes that he'd let me be. He came slowly forward. He took the money, made a wet throaty unintelligible sound which I for some reason interpreted as an expression of disgust, and turned to go; then he stopped, turned slowly back, and with a sort of flourish, removed his cloth. The movement of my scalp was palpable. I was barely nineteen at the time.

This is the only way I can put it: the man had no face.

• • • • •



"Distance is blue," said Tennessee Williams. I heard this from a colleague during a critique session at Ryerson many years ago when a student's photographs of a desert landscape were at issue. The line is from Williams' play *Camino Real*, occurring in the opening scene; the stage directions describe the first character who enters as being "dressed like an old 'desert rat.'"

> Quixote [ranting above the wind in a voice that is nearly as old]: Blue is the color of distance!
> Sancho [wearily behind him]: Yes, distance is blue.

Blue is also the colour of nobility; Quixote goes on to assert that one should have a bit of blue ribbon about one's person, tucked in what remains of one's armour, or borne on the tip of one's lance. It would serve "to remind an old knight of distance he has gone and distance he has yet to go…"

At this point Sancho mutters "the Spanish word for excrement."

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 100-101 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

• • • • •

"I loved my grandfather. I'd have faced death for him if it meant he could live." Is this selflessness? Or the extremity of egoism? Or is it merely ordinary melancholia? On the border, as Freud says, of psychosis to be sure, but ordinary nevertheless, something most of us have experienced.



When a loved one dies, the loss is a hole that opens up in the Real. A flood of images rushes in, as if to fill the gap. Mourning would work to marshal those images, to subject them, without guarantee of success, to some form of symbolic constraint in a difficult, painful process of indefinite duration, not necessarily terminable since that hole, that absence, will persist. It is not uncommon to seek to short-circuit the process, and thereby circumvent the pain and difficulty, by means of a fantasy of exchange: "rather me than him." This fantasy also serves to assuage the guilt associated with loss: "why him rather than me?"

In Franck's case, the profundity of the fantasy is writ large, since his offer of exchange is, on the face of it, so ludicrous. Why should a young man in his prime wish to die in the place of one so sick, frail and so very old? And, should the exchange be made, of what sort of life would Fred Howard be in possession? He would continue to be very old, frail and

sick, still at death's door, soon to cross the threshold, and Franck would be dead. Unless Fred became Franck, assumed his life entire. But there's nothing rational about fantasy: it's unconscious and the unconscious doesn't obey the rules of rational thought, and so we're obliged to take Franck seriously. His ingenuousness in exposing his pathology is one of the reasons his film is so compelling, at least to me.

• • • • •

"It was my grandfather's death that made me decide to cross the Sahara Desert by camel." This is given as the founding moment of the journey, and thereby of the film. No connection is established between grandfather and Sahara. Later we do see a photograph of a young boy, presumably Franck, mounted on a camel, but its provenance remains obscure. It eventually becomes clear that the Sahara is not the issue; it might as easily be the Arctic, some mountain, the bottom of the sea. What Franck wants is a trial, and his adversary will not be the landscape or environment, but death itself.

Franck is animated by, or perhaps at the mercy of, anxiety. I'll say this without presuming to know its specificity for him. He mentions particular moments of anxiety throughout the journey, but its most fundamental aspect is blocked, utterly occluded. We are twice given the images of the grandfather shaking in his hospital bed: frail, helpless, he is in the throes of death. The second longer version has Franck walk from the bedside to the camera, apparently to turn it off.

Anxiety surges up in the presence of the dying person, in the presence of the cadaver. "I will be that" is its simplest formulation. We can parse it more subtly: the corpse establishes an uncanny relation between here and nowhere, between personhood and mere materiality; the other has been immobilized thus, and I know his demise in the silence I feel in my soul when I find myself continuing to address my private thoughts to him from whom my distress recognizes that henceforth no response shall come; the cadaverous presence instills in me the foreboding of a death that shall not pass me by; I am mortified by the "unbearable image and figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what." (Blanchot)

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 102-103 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

In Franck's world, we have instead the personification of death as a master against whom it is possible to struggle, against whom one can test oneself (if the test is sufficiently severe), and against whom one can, presumably, prevail. A master whom one can utterly vanquish if the trial is onerous enough. A master whose secret name is Fred and who lives in a little glass bottle with a cork on top.

• • • • •

Is it beside the point to mention that cinema in effect "cadaverizes" its human objects? To recall, after Bazin, Barthes and others, that its basis in photography entails a process of preservation, of embalming? Mummification: a desert technology. Part of what is so productive of anxiety, so remorselessly uncanny, in the images of Fred's death throes is that their persistence is guaranteed; we can always return to them, must always return to them, in the endless repetition without variation that is the cinematic form. The other part stems from Cocteau's slogan that the cinema "films death at work." In some sense we see this process literalized in Fred, who appears as an elderly but relatively healthy man, as a dying man seemingly moments away from the end, and as a box of cinders. But death works in cinema's essential temporality, in the mere succession of frames one after another; death comes creeping in the moment it takes Franck to say: "I loved my grandfather."

A man crosses a desert. He crosses a desert, then comes back and makes a film about a man crossing a desert. Then he crosses the desert again and he doesn't come back. We shall go to him, but he shall not return to us.

• • • • •

The obsessional neurotic's question, Franck's question, is (at the level of the unconscious: I am underlining that word) "Am I alive or am I dead?" Being dead means being utterly outside enjoyment; enjoyment which is concentrated in, embodied by, a monstrous other, a master. Being alive is the position of mastery; it is an excessive, all-too-enjoying, obscene aliveness, which overcomes the very register of lack, which is therefore the very lack of lack. A position of mastery which overcomes, or obviates, or erases, or annihilates death itself.

The paradox here is that, in Franck's fantasy, the position of the troubling, uncanny, obscene aliveness that annihilates death is occupied by Franck's only master, also death. Death is a master from Ottawa, in a corked bottle lying in its custom compartment in the camera case, and it is death that enjoys, death that exceeds, death that is truly alive.



• • • • •

"I forced myself to become a recluse, to become a person so alone that I could never be crushed by loneliness." Thus Franck's justification for the annihilation of the other, which is one of the defining traits of obsessional neurosis. But in the "Preparation" section, there is a drift into perversion, mostly in the form of fetishism, as well. The pervert is the one who works unceasingly for the enjoyment of the other, and the one whose outlook is unmitigated certitude. The "Preparation" section is fetishistic in style, with the high-con black and white, the heavily and obviously foleyed sound effects, the minimalist staging, and it contains multiple and thoroughly eroticized fetish items: the dagger, the belt and buckle, the naked chest. Finally, the bottle is filled with the grandfather's ashes.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 104-105 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Fetishistic belief is structured in the form of repudiation: I know very well that this is merely an ordinary bottle containing cinders, but just the same, it is for me the very substance of my lost loved one. And since it is the very one, the very other, my very master whose obscene living enjoyment compels my journey in the first spinning place, it must accompany me, guide me, protect me, preserve me as I seek to overcome my foe in holocaustic utter burn. Consumption, consummation. Devoutly to be wished.



At the same time, as it is the master it is my foe, it is what I needs must overcome, burn utterly. In being alive I am only dead; I am nothing, I am going nowhere, better I should be dead than him. In being dead he is unbearably alive, intolerably enjoying; he is everything, he will take me across millions of metres of desert, he overcomes and in overcoming must be overcome, I must become him. I must be the one who says "I am become death, destroyer of worlds."

• • • • •

A couple of years ago, during one of innumerable car rides between Mobile and Buffalo, I told Jazzbo the story of the man in the skyblue dhoti. This unleashed a ten-week barrage of questions (a barrage which has since dwindled to occasional sniper fire, but which, I fear, will never

exhaust itself completely) because, as to my chagrin I eventually understood, the story has a structural and necessary lack in it, a fundamental incompleteness. The questions boiled down to one, really: what did his face look like? I can only say he had no face, even though I saw something; it seems beyond my capacity to describe what I saw except in terms of a nothingness. The story and its meaning had become, for me, a kind of metaphysical fable (lack of face = effacement = loss of self, of personality = loss generally = death), but try telling that to an eight-year-old.

• • • • •

When Franck initially mounts his camel and sets off down the road in Mauritania to begin his journey, waving back at a local man (and at the camera), he resembles Don Quixote in those famous illustrations (Matisse?). Shortly afterward, there's a shot of him crossing the frame left to right, in which he's the spitting image of a version of Sancho Panza that I think I saw as a doodle by Nabokov on one of the manuscript pages of his Cornell lectures on the novel.

• • • • •

Thinking is effacement, it attenuates the ego, edges toward the abstract and the general, which is to say, the human. Despite death's register outside experience, despite any locus of inquiry that might be canvassed for actual accounts, despite the resistance of death to symbolization as such, it is possible (if not necessary, if not absolutely (yes, pun intended) vital) to think it. Franck's thinking, however, amounts to little more than a vague articulation of his foundational fantasy (and it is worth bearing in mind here that whenever we enunciate the unconscious we inevitably render it vastly less complex and overdetermined than it actually is): I am haunted by death; my fear of death summoned me like a calling to the Sahara; I will confront death; I will fight back; I want life without death. Far from effacement, this approach places the self at the centre of the business, lets it loom large: we are repeatedly given Franck's face, or part of it, in close-up, to read the plainly written truths upon it.

The desert landscape, which he calls "featureless," is a garden of delights that quite properly ought to beckon to one, ought to compel an interested party to journey into, through and even across it. But from the moment he sets foot on the sandy Mauritanian beach, everywhere Franck (or his

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 106-107 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

camera) looks the desert is covered with carcasses, flattened, desiccated, inert. Franck makes no grave metaphysical judgments. He simply makes a grave.

• • • • •

"Still haunted by death, nine years later he returned to the Sahara." It may be that I'm being too harsh in judging what may only be a tarnished and commonplace cliché. Perhaps we are merely witness to the harnessing of an inchoate but ineluctable response to an inevitable but occluded reality, like the awareness of equilibrium revealed at the moment we lose it.

But I don't think so.

In my view (contorted as it may be), this being "haunted by death" is either not as transparent and readily digestible as one might hope, or else it is far too transparent, and party to that species of "personification" or "anthropo-morphization" that exists simply to render its object (death in this case) completely outside real intelligibility. It might be palatable, even comforting, to metaphorize death as an adversary against which we can struggle and even prevail, but we require (do we not?) art to give us something more. If this only is the result of the real enough encounters with death that the film depicts, if it is the limit of the insight to which those encounters give rise, then one would prefer it if *Life Without Death* was actually a film about a man crossing the Sahara Desert alone by camel. It can only be imagined how a rigorous contemplation of (the full scope of) the desert landscape, its hideousness and its beauty, its proximity and its distance, its history and future, as well as a consideration of other obvious themes such as solitude, the journey, its risks and rewards, art, loss (there are no doubt numerous others) and even (dare I say?) an actual engagement with the Saharan people, might have produced a film in which the journey, the desert, and Franck in it, could be seen directly and without let.

• • • • •

> *To philosophize is to learn how to die.*
>
> (Montaigne, after Seneca)

• • • • •

Death eludes comprehension. It is what we cannot take hold of, what on the contrary comes to take us. That is, to take me.



If death is incomprehensible, it is not because it is invisible or intangible, unobservable, nothingness; it is because it is radically, irremediably singular. Ungeneralizable and therefore unconceptualizable, it is not unintelligible but rather the first intelligible, eminently understood in all understanding.

The understanding of the singular death makes understanding real, for all real beings are in the singular. What is intelligible is not first a singular being, the being that exists in the first-person singular, but the singularity of non-being, the incomparable and solitary absoluteness of nothingness unrelentingly closing in on me.

Nothingness cannot make sense, make itself sensed, except as a singular and unrepeatable catastrophe, in the specificity of my own destination for it.

• • • • •

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 108-109 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Don Quixote's misfortune is not his imagination,
but Sancho Panza.

(Kafka)

• • • • •



The world is not a shelter from death; it is neither an arena within which we are to struggle against death. On the contrary, death is everywhere in the world; it is the world itself. The end, nothingness, is everywhere latent, and in opening the door upon the landscape of the world I open it upon the abyss.

In advancing down the pathways of the world, I very certainly go to my death. With one and the same movement existence projects itself, fascinated, into the world and projects itself, anxiously, unto its death.

The movement of existence is not the stalwart advance of some shining knight upon his steed, armed with a lance tipped with a ribbon of blue, shielded by a perverse certitude; it is, as Heidegger puts it, a groping.

• • • • •

Kafka's fragment, "The Truth About Sancho Panza," deserves quotation in full, as it is so delightfully brief: "Without making any boast of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits, which, however, for the lack of a preordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed nobody. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and had of them a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days."

Here Don Quixote, lost though he may be, is only a puppet. It wasn't he who spent a lifetime reading tales of knight-errancy and losing himself in febrile daydreams. Rather it was Sancho, who quickly grasped that those tales, with all the demons they aroused, would kill him in short order. And since Don Quixote didn't exist, Sancho had to invent him. Don Quixote was the name Sancho gave to the demon that dwelt within him, and whose destructive rage he required to "divert from himself."

Once the demon had found a name and become a character, its excesses no longer had to be suffered. Instead, Sancho could observe it from a certain distance.

Distance is blue.

• • • • •

The impotence of my death discloses to me my impotence with regard to my birth. Destined to death, delivered over to being: such is the specific nature of my passivity, the passivity of existence, affected by things and afflicted with itself.

To be delivered over to being is to be delivered over to death. It is to be subject to things, not only as a subject in which their refracted attributes can inhere, but subject to them, exposed to their forms and their qualities but also to their force and their aggression, mortified by them. It is an essential mortal structure that is expressed in our taste for the colours, our ear for what is intoned across the fields of being, our appetite for the honey and the lees of the day.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 110-111 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

• • • • •

So Don Quixote, personified raging demon, undertook "the craziest exploits." Sancho was free to resume a contemplative life of modest interests (is this what we call philosophy?), while following, out of responsibility, his creature.

This fable suggests to me a sort of "royal road" to sublimation, whereby the invention, creature, puppet (artwork?) is invested with the destructive, enjoying, all-too-alive impulses within the subject, so that they may play out, harming nobody; so that they may be observed from a distance; so that their vicissitudes may be subject to contemplation.

As if the alternative would be fatal.

• • • • •

I like to encounter what I call "moments of unwatchability" in films. There's one in Phil Hoffman's film *passing through/torn formations*, with the video image of Phil's mum translating the voices of the Polish relatives as they tell the story of Uncle Janek's murder by his son. An example from the (relatively) dominant cinema would be the highway rest stop encounter between Vincent Gallo and Cheryl Tiegs in Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (not to mention the infamous blowjob sequence from the same film). Myriad others could be adduced. These are moments which arouse acute discomfort in the viewer (or maybe it's just me), decentering, mortifying him, overwhelming in some sense his capacity to grasp them aesthetically (or any other way).

I find these moments compelling, can't turn away. They're like men without faces.

Here it's the sobbing scene. Right at the beginning of the film, shot from a weirdly high angle (who is there? who is shooting? how could anybody shoot this?), the sobbing Franck is clearly not the bedside Franck we've just seen; he's much older, and in retrospect it would seem that this scene was made after his return from the desert. Is this a performance, or a genuine moment? If the latter, why is the grief so persistent? Is it the same grief? Did Franck set up the shot, or is there in fact somebody else

present? Why show this? Does it, or is it meant to, underwrite the loss that Franck articulates in various ways throughout the film? And so on.



The answers to these questions are unknown, and for me irrelevant. The violence of the grief, the heaving naked belly and chest, the erotic volume: I am pierced by the sobbing scene, tasked and heaped by it, find it repulsive and over-the-top, precisely unwatchable.

And thus utterly fascinating.

• • • • •

A man crosses a desert. He crosses a desert and then returns, and makes a film about a man crossing a desert. And then he returns to the desert, and then he doesn't return.

Hors texte: I've tried to be scrupulous in taking the film on its own terms, but I'm not immune to what's available to be gleaned from the internet. So I beg this one indulgence: it seems that after being found murdered in Mali, the filmmaker's remains were not returned home to Ottawa, but instead were "cryogenically preserved at the Michigan Cryonics Institute in suburban Detroit's Clinton Township."

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 112-113 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

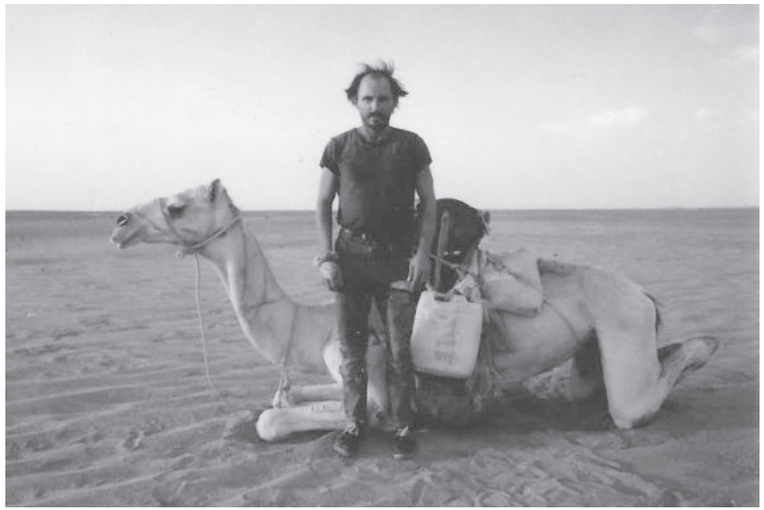
I don't know if this is true. But it is the stain on the garment, the remnant, the irreducible remainder that exceeds any possible closure of account.

And then he returns to the desert, and then he doesn't return.
And then he returns.

• • • • •

With Melville, Franck seems to be saying: "I've made up my mind to be annihilated."

• • • • •



If a mortal force of life can still assemble and steer itself, it is because it makes contact with a ground, a density of being closed in itself, the supporting element of the terrestrial. Precarious, fortuitous, the grain of substances takes form under the hand, the opaque still sustains the palpitation of the gaze.

Beneath the general and abstract outlines of the recurrent things, a mortal clairvoyance discerns the unrecurrent, the ephemeral, the fleeting; it discerns a field of chances, understands real beings, which are in the singular. The singular death imminent about me takes form in the singular

constellation of possibilities, instrumentalities, chances and snares which form the singular landscape of the sensible world arrayed for me.

• • • • •

So, are you saying that art has to be philosophical?

No, I'm saying it should strive to protect us from, or at least alert us to, (our own) aggression and affliction, bear itself responsibly in the world, maintain a certain distance and provide instances of great and edifying entertainment, in the full sense of that word.

If we learn from it how to die, so much the better.

• • • • •

There came a day when the old knight Don Quixote, while reminding himself of the distance he had gone, no longer needed reminding of the distance he had yet to go; he succumbed to a fever which had kept him in bed for six days, during which time Sancho Panza, his good squire, never left his side.

(Originally published in *Life Without Death: The Cinema of Frank Cole*, ed. M. Hoolboom and Tom McSorley, Canadian Film Institute, 2009)

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 114-115 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Flintmaker

2012

Cinema is an invention without a future. (LL)

to underline that when he says "reformist," he means it as a slur, but at the same time turns it around on itself; sometimes the most despicable and loathsome adversary provides rescue for the castaway. (The old man was always sure that the survivors of the Hood were picked up by a German U-boat, but his memory failed him on that one.) Or if

…*in this critical ocean.* (HMa)

but you have to be able to read them, have to be prepared to offer yourself to the reading, and to do the work. Maybe sometimes (as you've said before) the reading is better than the film. My point would be that certainly the reading could be better or as good (or it could be worse, much worse), could itself be "available for decipherment," could contain more than what was put into it, could be part of a (structurally) interminable chain of cultural objects, ultimately "Culture" itself. And we could say, ultimately "Mourning" itself, since (as I never tire of saying) an apt way to define culture is to say that it is precisely what exists to ensure that the dead are mourned. Part of my response to the film is mournful, that it is what it is and not otherwise, and never will be. Since it is what it is and not what it could've been, not any part of that infinite array of potential, but merely *this*, it stands in





the place of the cadaver, under the sign of irrevocable, intractable loss. One has, then, the option of contending with its trace, which may well include its unfulfilled

They were silent, as the dead usually are in our dreams. (WGS)

trying to think back to the time in question. And it "remained a riddle to him, despite his most strenuous thinking about it." There is no way to go back, to think back, to the time in question: a lesson, maybe, for the dead who return searching for life, and for the living who, feeling that they belong to an earlier world, are preparing to drown in it. Max (Max F and/or Max S?) tries to displace himself into the past of that encounter, chasing after the man who forever chases, he finds himself applying paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratching it off, covering the floor with an encrusted deposit of droppings mixed with coaldust, thick

One knows the hammer by hammering. (MH)

and when I got it I was a bit astonished, I have to say. I mean, who actually "writes a letter" these days? But apparently we can count on you doing your part to maintain the continuity of tradition, a pursuit to which I add my own small contribution with my sharpening mania in the cellar. Strop till you drop I say! Not quite there yet, but soon I'll have the old 4 1/2 producing shavings under a thou. (Remember the call to the mincer from down in the try pots in "The Cassock" chapter? "Bible leaves! Bible leaves!") But enough about the ongoing refinement of my erotic life. You asked whether I was writing any

So many true things // which are not truth itself. (SHa)





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 116-117 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

obscure film likely unseen by most who'll read the piece; unavailable on DVD in North America, not apt to appear anytime soon at a theater near you, and about as different from *PL* as, say, *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* is from *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. Not sure if you saw it; I think that when

The wonderful future he dreamt of that summer collapsed without a sound like the proverbial house of cards. All his prospects blurred. For the first time, he experienced that insuperable sense of defeat that was so often to beset him in later times and which, finally, he could not shake off. (WGS)

has something on that order too, though I'd need a metaphor other than "dogged" to identify it: one more "energetic" maybe. He's also got verbal, poetic and intellectual capabilities that others lack; it occurred to me that some of his writing is like Creeley in the 50s, in the letters to Olson: fast-breaking semi-coded riffs with time-delayed explosive capacity; strings of little astronuggets that reading constellates into thoughtworlds. Perhaps I'm just making this up. I sometimes wonder whether anyone

He stands at a border of whiteness. Facing away from us. Blind to the color of our sail. (AC)

did everything in my power to avoid for as long as possible actually writing, or at least finishing it. It's about (or it's supposed to be about, shall we say) a film by Hoo

The names of all fine authors are fictitious ones. (HMb)

the film several times, a particular quotation kept popping into my head: a recondite eruption from the old dissertation days back in the theory shack in Bufftown, when we were supremely disciplined, strict Althusserian Leninists if you recall. Ah, Youth! For whatever reason, I became resolute in the desire to structure the piece around the armature of that quote, and this has been the real bane of the effort to finish, since said structuring required relentless deformation, distortion, distraction (in the etymological sense) of *PL*, but tough tits: I must (mustn't I?) always stick to my guns, however ill-conceived or prone to (textual) viol

And I saw her for the last time when, awakened from my Deauville dream, I went to the window of my hotel room. Morning was breaking. The beach still merged colourless into the sea, the sea into the sky. And there she was, in the pale but glowing light of daybreak, on the deserted Promenade des Planches. (WGS)

because I'd seen (again) that *Patience* film, which led me to reread *The Emigrants*, the mighty Sebald, like his ubiquitous butterfly man, popped out of the bloody ground and into

*Yet this same placid Ocean, as civil now as a city's harbor, a place for ships and commerce, will erelong be lashed into a sudden fury, and all its caves and cliffs will resound with tumult… This gentle ocean will toss and tear the rag of a man's body like the father of mad bulls, and his relatives may be seeking the remnants for weeks along the strand. (*HDT)

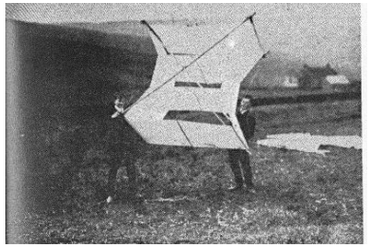
or rather an effect at once overwhelming, oceanic but at the same time cadaverizing, making death present; silence; jabbering

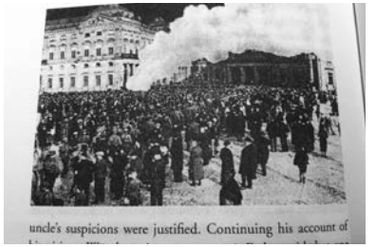
You can tell the genius by what he steals. That he steals. By his flights of fancy. An idiot thief: he should have flown on his own, robbed himself, had he known. Instead of going to take his self from another, risk everything in a rickety calculation, be just a montage about to collapse. (HCa)

and largely hardened at the center near his canvas "and thinning out toward the outer edges, in places resembling the flow of lava." He had long felt it be of the utmost importance that "nothing should change at his place of work… and that nothing further should be added but the debris generated by painting and the dust that continuously fell and which, as he was coming to realize, he loved more than anything else in the world." The scene of inscription, of artistic production construed as the production of dust, debris, lava which falls or flows from the "continual wiping away of that which is drawn," "when the matter, little by little, dissolves into nothing," or very little. Almost nothing. So art doesn't recapture a lost object, it's not in search of *temps perdu*, it's neither testimony nor recovered memory. Not only. Not simply. Nor does it

We evoke men of the sea, brave navigators, frightened and also enchanted, mastering the most dangerous unknown (that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs),

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 118-119 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





by observing a regular movement, a first legality. Everything comes from the sea for men of the sea, just as everything comes from the sky for others, who recognize a given cluster of stars and who designate, in the magic "configuration" of these points of light, the nascent rhythm which already governs their entire language and which they speak (write) before naming it. (MB)

that *PL* begins with a section called "Writing" only underlines this feature and suggests, at least to me, that Hoolboom (that is, the one I'm calling Hoolboom, the one whose name is on the film), along with Robert Bresson and that Cree guy ("Here are two pens. Write a film about me!") in that film Phil Hoffman made up north (whose title I have apparently lagoonized), believes precisely in "cinematography," and in *PL* he practices his faith. But he can't do it without complication, without displacement. He can't do it without irony. Esma from Amsterdam: "The words don't come from me. They come from other books, conversations with friends… I arrange them, that's all." She later demonstrates this: "Every wound gives off its own light, and some of these wounds are words."(Anne Carson) She goes on to describe her project ("I'm going to tell you six stories…") and concludes: "They will constitute my work as a young writer." (Cf. Steve Reinke's aim "to complete 100 videos by the year 2000 and my 36th birthday. These will constitute my work as a young artist." Reinke (his unmistakable voice) immediately turns up

Write! Write! (KH)

a letter to Straub and Huillet written at the time he agreed to take part, Fortini takes note of the ways in which they had, in their previous films, complicated the relations between pre-text (Böll, Brecht, Schoenberg, etc.) and the eventual filmic text. He adds: "It is therefore clear that the character in the film of *I cani del Sinai* [Fortini reading his book] is not exactly the author of that little book nor yet the "I" who





am writing to you now." And further: "I understand that your warning to me not to trust you meant that there was to be no visible complicity between you and me-as-character or even (in spite of everything) the literalness of my words in *Cani*. Perhaps you won't treat me with the critical distance you used in the letter [from Shoenberg] to Kandinsky [in *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene"*]; but a critical distance there will be, and thanks to that I too shall be carried a stage forward." Not sure what he means by that last bit, but not a bad initial articulation of the problematics of authorship and enunciation, *n'est-ce pas*? In addition to the many lengthy

In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge… but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures… at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. (RS)

where I wanted to imagine that he thought himself to be striding across the deck of his first ship which was the battlecruiser HMS Hood, on which he served while she was under repair in Gibraltar; a few months later she made her way to Portsmouth (where he was unaccountably transferred to the Fleet Air Arm), before steaming north to Scapa Flow, and on to her fate in the Denmark Strait, from which only three of about 1400 souls escaped alone to tell thee), or bounding down the beach into a magnificent surf at sunset, rather than

There is too much self in my writing. (AC)

Fortini reading *I cani del Sinai* onscreen and in voice-over, *F-C* also offers images of a variety of texts to be read by the viewer:

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 120-121 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

the cover and pages from Fortini's book; hand-written notes by Fortini; newspaper passages, including a substantial one with a chart; various inscriptions on historical plaques and memorials. There is an excerpt from a televised news broadcast concerning the outbreak of war between Egypt and Israel in June 1967, a woman and a man who comment briefly on that situation, a portion of a service in a synagogue with a rabbi chanting (from the book of Numbers, IV, 1-20: check that out when you get a chance). The rest of the visual material of this heavily verbal, textual film is comprised of shots of unidentified

Memory is fundamentally nothing but a citation. (WGS)

Her name is Marine. Simple as that.

… but that docility, as I was already beginning to suspect, was in fact due simply to your great-uncle's longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember. (WGS)

would agree that flints and rough diamonds may be subversive because they are insoluble in the ubiquitous wash of sentimental drivel and heroic propaganda and *Erinnerungslosigkeit*, but are they likely to generate any sparks, much less ignite anything in the general gormless slurry of "I want, therefore I

Infinite alterity is quite simply what there is. *Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. Even the apparently reflexive experience of myself is by no means the intuition of a unity but a labyrinth of differentiations, and Rimbaud was certainly not wrong when he said: "I am another." There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself.* (AB)

the one who has achieved the widest field of view, perhaps because he's taken the most risk, because his act of refusal is the most uncompromising. Still I think

The fabulous shadow only the sea keeps. (HCb)

is obviously functionally linked to Straub/Huillet, as a fellow author/artist, but his status (as he suggests in the letter) is utterly fraught, over-determined, constrained, deformed, distracted (in

the etymological sense), disastered even, putting entirely into question the point of enunciation from which Fortini's words, not to mention the film itself, emerge. As is, wouldn't you say, the authorial status of S/H. (And doesn't this put into question the film's *enouncé*, all the moyles and moyles of it, as well?) Likewise in the Ferber section of *The Emigrants*, the painter is a stand-in for the author, his tormented "lagoon of oblivion" also Sebald's, complicating any facile notion of authorial voice. By the way, what gets translated as "oblivion" is, in Sebald's German original *Erinnerungslosigkeit*, which I prefer to render as "remembrancelessness," maybe out of sheer perversity (or maybe I just like big Germanic-sounding words: remember my "orphanhoodedness" riff in the *Disasterologies* "performance piece" at J's first Lacan conference? The besplattered giant of *Ljubljana* could hardly get a word in *Hochkantstauchdruck*.) But remembrancelessness suggests

… Rita Hayworth on a jetty in a nuit américaine *of blue-filtered daylight. What was once a film in a movie theatre, then a fragment of broadcast television, is now a kernel of psychical representations, a fleeting association of discrete elements: a voice full of urgency; the passive indifference of painted-palms; a woman waving across the unbridgeable gap that separates the real jetty where she stands from the studio set where a man pretends to leave. The more the film is distanced in memory, the more the binding effect of narrative is loosened. The sequence breaks apart. The fragments go adrift and enter into new combinations, more or less transitory, in the eddies of memory: memories of other films, and memories of real events.* (VB)

seems so familiar to me (albeit darkly so) that I am sure (but not utterly sure and there's no way from this vantage to be utterly sure) that it's been lifted, more or less holus-bolus, from somewhere amongst *The 100 Videos*. Of course, I could be wrong. I could even be wrong knowingly. (But I do feel sure.) So she arranges them, that's all, and nothing wrong with that I guess; wasn't it your hero Walter Benjamin's dream to author (or should we say compose?) a work consisting entirely of citations? But the entire passage is a bit more stunning: "I arrange them, that's all. That's all a writer can ever do." You either let this pass over you in your benign indifference, or you're charmed by the ingenuousness of the naive young writer, or (I suppose it's possible) you blithely agree and wait for the next maxim. Or else you bang your head against a door because it's pointless to scream "How can you say that?! You're a writer? Have you never heard of Emily Dickinson?! Clarice Lispector?! Anne Carson?!" (Right, you have heard of her.) And yes, yes,

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 122-123 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

you can take the argument to the level of the signifier and beyond; there are only so many words, so many phonemes, so many minimal pairs; there's a structural limit at the level of linguistic materiality, etc., etc. But sure, we

So writing involves some dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know. It is the clearing that takes time. It is the clearing that is a mystery. (AC)

to apply the metaphor of the semipermeable membrane (film), separating images from things, to language (the primordial act of naming), (re)establishes the "near field" effects of osmotic pressure or quantum tunneling. There is, in language, a thin but constant traffic with the real; song is the resolvent cancellation of the skin, the heart's passage through the throat. Distant points on the world line may be neighbors in phase space. As close as the two sides of a letter, or a computer scree

My prose pieces are, to my mind, nothing more nor less than parts of a long, plotless, realistic story. For me, the sketches I produce now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel. The novel I am constantly writing is always the same one, and might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself. (RWa)

when I attempted to remind him a short while back that he had once, maybe a number of years ago, said to me, "Painting is boring." He didn't remember saying this, and didn't believe he had, and if he had (which he certainly hadn't, he was sure), he may have been speaking "ironically." I didn't know why he would've done that, in that particular context, and said so, to which he replied that it was something that he did. Sometimes, I suppose. On occasion. Naturally, this doesn't prove anything, although I'm inclined to believe in the ironic possibility.





Because the (relatively) little but quite a bit more than nothing I know about him as a person, and the (relatively) more but nowhere near everything I know of him as an artist, brings me to the point of (maybe slightly incomplete) certainty that he could not possibly actually believe that painting is boring. Unless

Not everything that is irrational can be dismissed as stupidity. (EB)

language is necessity, and thus a necessary constraint, but within it immeasurable infinities of singular and multiple possibilities, multiple and singular modes of textual production, singular "voices" or ensembles of voices available to be animated and made concretely actual by manifold acts of (and resistances to) volition on the parts of those who can't avoid being writers, and even (at times) those who can. An ocean of singularities, and singular multiplicities, and multiple singularities, and sheer multiples, submerged, buoyed up, foundered, cruising deviously, engulfed, swallowed by whales or bobbing along on top of Queequeg's coffin or clinging to the carcass of a lost torpedo plane. No doubt the process of "arranging" adduced by Esma would account for a certain range within these infinities, but to universalize it, to make it the *Ultima Thule* of writing, is just

He says something, and then come moments when he is outright happy as a child, and then of course the girl makes a rather severe, punitive face, just to show him a little how very strangely he does fool around with his life. The girl is a Kleist and has enjoyed an education, exactly what her brother has wanted to throw overboard. At heart she is naturally glad that he is feeling better. On and on, well well, what a journey it is. But finally one has to let it go, this stagecoach, and last of all one can permit oneself the observation that on the front of the villa where Kleist lived there hangs a marble plaque which indicates who lived and worked there. Travelers who intend to tour the Alps can read it, the children of Thun read it and spell it out, letter by letter,





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 124-125 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

and then look questioning into each other's eyes. A Jew can read it, a Christian too, if he has the time and if his train is not leaving that very instant, a Turk, a swallow, insofar as she is interested, I also, I can read it again if I like. Thun stands at the entrance to the Bernese Oberland and is visited every year by thousands of foreigners. I know the region a little perhaps, because I worked as a clerk in a brewery there. The region is considerably more beautiful than I have been able to describe here, the lake is twice as blue, the sky three times as beautiful. Thun had a trade fair, I cannot say exactly but I think four years ago. (RWb)

when you say that it's "not that writing (or painting) is inherently self-centered and therefore leads to dead ends——that's not the deeper problem. One's attitude periodically becomes fearful and self-centered, and the pathology of that is felt in everything you touch. Writing becomes an intolerable mirror of attitude at times, but I think it's wrong to place blame on words." OK yes, I think this is true, but "fearful and self-centered" may be an appropriate response to the power of ubiquitous unavoidable exploitation. One of our myths is that the way the world sucks us dry is an invention of our paranoid imaginations, a failure of generosity or openness, an unwillingness to offer ourselves up to the *pyr katharsion* of social existence. Bullshit, I say. The structures we create to manufacture "value" are clearly exploitative, and their chief business is to fill all available blanks and silences with words and images (or icons even) designed to solicit our constant and undivided enthusiasm for this or that "public" cause. I don't blame this on words, but I don't

Of him who ate the book and the mystery within it, one can, in effect, ask the question: Is he good, or is he bad? That question now seems unimportant. The important thing is not knowing whether man is good or bad in the beginning; the important thing is what will transpire once the book has been eaten. (JL)

believed to have been an intense cordite fire surging through the engineroom ventilators, leading to the explosion in the magazine that obliterated the after part of the ship. One of the survivors, Ted Briggs I think, said that the sea was boiling next to the hull as it went

From the sinking whalebrow / I read you—— / you recognize me, // heaven / hurls itself / into the harpoon (PC)

disposed in a singular way on the body of each singular subject, and it is around these residual pockets of enjoyment that the

drives emerge. "The *Trieb*," says Lacan, "implies in itself the advent of the signifier." And what does the angel say? "Thou must prophesy." It's a maxim, a duty. You must speak to peoples, nations, tongues and kings the truth that resides bitter in your belly, even though that speech from the belly comes from other than where you take yourself to be, and even though you may not know what you are saying. At this point I might as well

Where you are where I would be / half thought thought otherwise / Loveless and sleepless the sea (SHb)

dealing as it does with alienation, the disposition of the drives upon the body, tattooing, the question of interpretation, and separation; the separation from place of origin as unsettledness (the unsettled science of cetology, landlessness as the residence of highest truth) and the question of settling of accounts (narrative, capitalist); and finally, servitude, the condition of work in the capitalist machine on land or at sea, the problem of the slavish shore, and of course, slavery itself. I want to stress that this condition of "orphanhoodedness" (that's what I'm calling it) is always and everywhere predicated on some primordial (and likely immemorial) loss (of derivation, of origin, of place, or freedom) and so we want to know: what is the experience of this loss, how is it experienced, what is the relation of the subject to loss and the lost object? And so on. Provisionally, let's say that loss involves the subject in a point of trauma, that loss engages the affects of guilt and grief and the process of mourning, and that both the trauma and the lost object are encrypted ("vaulted," we could say, since we're doing etymology), secret, hidden (and this is where the "hoodedness" comes in, about which I can say more later; for now, keep in mind what you already know about the etymology of whale, and note that through the Latin cognates for vault, vaulting, rolling etc., we are led to the word "vulva.") To put asunder, to separate

A place of distress, shipwrecked. (MD)

not only oblivion, amnesia, but also the absence of memorials, a lack of re-collection, or of rituals of grief or mourning, or their attendant markers; perhaps even a failure to properly honor the past, tradition, the hidden and secret lore, the lost, the dead, even to the point of submersion in or engulfment by this failure: a sublime "lagooning"

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 126-127 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





perhaps? Max's work (and of course he's called Max, the name Sebald was called by family and friends, and nowadays, now that he's gone, by fans), these failed portraits like the one of the butterfly man, which he only starts after countless preliminary studies, which he overlays innumerable times, which he subjects to continual scratching-off and reapplication of paint only to wind up with a faceless portrait of a face no longer recalled and no longer

The longer I studied the photographs, the more urgently I sensed a growing need to learn more about the lives of the people in them. (WGS)

unable to bring myself to believe that Hoolboom (the one I'm calling Hoolboom) could possibly be of the party that would send the FBI to Sturges' studio, seize his work and equipment, and bind him over as a "child pornographer" any more than I can imagine him so blithely

Man looking into the sea, / taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to it yourself, / it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing, / but you cannot stand in the middle of this; (MM)

has no clothes, if indeed he hasn't. Having looked at it so many times by then, I saw that it was all over the place, as if he has no idea what to do, and then at the end, had to finish it in an impossible situation. Maybe he waited too long: clearly, at the point he finished it he was over it, or as over it as anybody gets, which on second thought may not be much. (The sadistic side of my thing (not deliberate, oh no, I assure you) is that it wants to make him see how much more devastated he could be, how he could continue to be so, etc.) There's also the problem of deliberately making a piece which mourns, rather than one which, in spite of or beside itself, exhibits the mournful, is an instance of mourning





regardless of the specificity of its subject; to do this you need a kind of meta-language (or meta-cinema); a mournful discourse about mourning itself. He's not an intellectual, not the guy to come up with this on purpose. He's the guy in the back seat with the heavy camera and a gifted

Whereas ego countersigns liminal existence, "I," the anonymous, the spider's lieutenant, signs it. With an X, a mandibular mark. Signs or, rather, signals existence: the gash signals that I was here, within the experience of crude and null existence. Inevitable deferral of writing with respect to the experience of the monster. Dread is voiceless, deaf. That's why it cannot lie. (JFL)

belligerent and abusive, so the head injury he sustained was more or less a *coup de grâce*. I gave the authorization for the termination of life-support, and for the post-mortem sectioning of his brain for research. I didn't for a moment think he'd stepped into the road on purpose; or rather, I didn't think he'd purposely stepped into *that* road. Meddings said his old man, who also had it, constantly imagined (I really doubt that's the right word; these things must be far from flights of fancy) that he was in the POW camp in Italy where he spent a couple of years prior to the Allied invasion and the fall of Mussolini. He'd even start talking in broken Italian, desperately

On page 248 in The Rings of Saturn, *W G Sebald is recounting his interviews with one Thomas Abrams, an English farmer who has been working on a model of the temple of Jerusalem – you know, gluing little bits of wood together – for 20 years, including the painstaking research required for historical accuracy. There are ducks on the farm and at one point Abrams says to Sebald, "I have always kept ducks, even as a child, and the colors of their plumage, in particular the dark green and the snow white, seem to be the only possible answer to the questions that are on my mind." It is an odd thing to say, but Sebald's book is a long walk of oddities. I did not remember*

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 128-129 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

this passage in particular until later the same day when I was reading the dictionary, where I came upon the meaning of the word speculum: 1) an instrument inserted into a body passage for inspection; 2) an ancient mirror; 3) a medieval compendium of all knowledge; 4) a drawing showing the relative position of all the planets; and 5) a patch of color on the secondary wings of most ducks and some other birds. Did Sebald know that a compendium of all knowledge and the ducks' plumage were one and the same? Did Abrams? Or was I the only one for whom the duck passage made perfect, original sense? I sat in my chair, shocked. I am not a scholar, but for the imaginative reader there can be discoveries, connections between books, that explode the day and one's heart and the long years that have led to the moment. (MR)

she remembered that Barthes is supposed to have said once to Philippe Sollers: "Whenever you give somebody something to read, you are giving it to your mother." I began wondering if that applies to putting a film out there. (What RB meant by "giving it to" notwithstanding: a student of mine once said in class, as a refutation of the Oedipus complex, "You oughta see my mother!") Anyway, I don't know if this fragmentary morass makes any sense to you, but the fact is that the film had now profoundly changed. Now at last I had a way to answer people who mistakenly thought it was a film about Susan. Including Susan. I had to shoot

And so they are ever returning to us, the dead. At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later and are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots. (WGS)

because let's face it, apart from everything else, there is a real girl who's been photographed, who is depicted in the photograph, and her name is not Amy. Her name is Marine. What is spoken by the actor portraying Amy, this discourse that the shadowy MH adduces and comments on in the interview, does not belong to Marine. But it is given to her, it speaks for her, it commits (or apparently commits) the indignity of speaking for others; it inscribes Marine within a rather tarnished, shopworn, practically bankrupt line of aesthetic-political argument, rather lacking in intellect or vitality in its presentation in the interview or in *PL* itself, more or less reduced to a tawdry heap of codewords and slogans; designed (so it would seem) to arouse the viewer's sympathy for the girl as having been violated in some way, tragically so, or so the actor's portrayal seems meant to convey; and designed as well to arouse the ire of the viewer toward the photographer who is responsible for this

violation (and whose unfortunate name, which "Amy" gleefully mocks, might as well be Dick or Cock or PHALLUS). But is this really

I would be a falcon and go free. / I tread her wrist and wear the hood, / talking to myself, and would draw blood. (RD)

massive proliferation of artist "avatars" commences: Esma, obviously; Steve Reinke's voice and the Reinke-esque (to my mind) discourse and imagery give rise to the specter of the world's greatest video artist haunting *PL*; Philip Glass and Madonna; the "amnesiac" filmmaker; the silent photographer; and in the "Amy" section we see Amy (the actor portraying Amy) with a movie camera, but more important is the despised photographer, Jock. In addition, we can salvage from the depths of the familiar (though sometimes murky) "apparatus" fringing the fringe cinema (filmmaker Q & As after screenings, artist statements, interviews, festival blurbs, descriptions of works in various distribution catalogs, panel participation at conferences, etc.), a shadowy "MH" who is prone (not always, but often enough that it can't help seeming deliberate, an instance of "performance" *hors-textuelle*) to making truly outrageous statements about what is going on in *PL*, much to the delight of the eager

Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache / Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé / Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses, lâche / Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai. (AR)

not to say that once something's written, once it's inscribed, there's an absolute guarantee of permanence or continuity, or that any final arrest has been brought to bear on the proverbial "sliding signifier." ("Stealing" and "flying" are the same word in French (*voler*), and when little French girls play Cinderella, they dress up in slippers made of squirrel fur, which in heraldic French is *vair*, homonymical with *verre*, glass. Or so I'm told.) And of course Plato, in the Seventh Letter and also somewhere else, writes (without irony, I suppose) "Writing is poison to thought." (Does he use the word *pharmakon* for poison? If so, I guess I should reconsider about the irony.)

He clearly found it impossible to use his voice, and so responded to what I said only at lengthy intervals, in an attempt at speech that sounded like the rustle of dry leaves in the wind. Still, it was plain enough that he felt his condition was something to

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 130-131 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

be ashamed of and had resolved to put it behind him as soon as possible, one way or another. (WGS)

to say at least that Hoolboom (the one who is called Hoolboom) wears everywhere and always (and in all of his various *personae*) a mighty carapace of irony (to borrow Anne Carson's nicely wrought image; and please, do not mistake irony for some light and flimsy simple thing) which secures the multiple deployment, dispersion, dissolution and reconstitution of authorship, of textual authority, of points of enunciation which mark his style in *PL* and many other works. It also underwrites his policy of appropriating, of admitting, the infinite archive of images, sounds and words ascribed to authorships outside (but only presumably outside) his (presumable) own. It is one key, at least, by which he and we together might be carried a stage

Nothing distinguishes memories from other moments: it is only later that they make themselves recognized, by their scars. (CM)

in the Fairey Swordfish (or the "String Bag," as he used to call it), which was exceedingly slow and thus vulnerable to fighter escorts, and was often sent out well beyond its range so that once they'd dropped their sole torpedo, the crew wound up having to ditch on the way back when they ran out of fuel. Not that many were ever picked up. But luckily for him, he spent almost his entire 6 years in the skies over Portsmouth, training younger fishfodder to operate the puny Vickers machine guns ("Fucking bloody pea-shooters," as he put it). His rank on demob was Air Gunner/Telegrapher, Fleet Air Arm, which had about the same status as an Army Corporal. Guess that explains his blinkin' son. Or maybe





If the word revolution had not been made almost ridiculous through abuse, one would have to say that revolutionary action today has to be even more reformist than the reformist; apparently myopic, dedicated to small but sure operations, to making diamonds or deadly artificial flints, to minute sabotage, to patient but total destruction. To attract the occasional bark or the occasional bite is a matter truly of no importance, with no merit or demerit. It is necessary to wish something very different, and above all to believe, with Lenin, that for every situation there exists one way out and the possibility of finding it. Or in other words that truth exists, absolute in its relativity. (FF)

is what she would've said; and do thank her for the Two-tailed Pasha specimens and the fine photos of *Ardéchois* scenery. Looking forward to seeing you both there in June (Skelley has decreed that we should be *en France* for my 60th, to celebrate with *rillets de porc* and those two magnums of Cornas I know you've got secreted in the root cellar), and if possible getting to one of those *plages naturistes* on the coast. My camera

This he considered one of his most unsatisfactory works, because in his view it conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness of the apparition it referred to. (WGS)





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 132-133 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

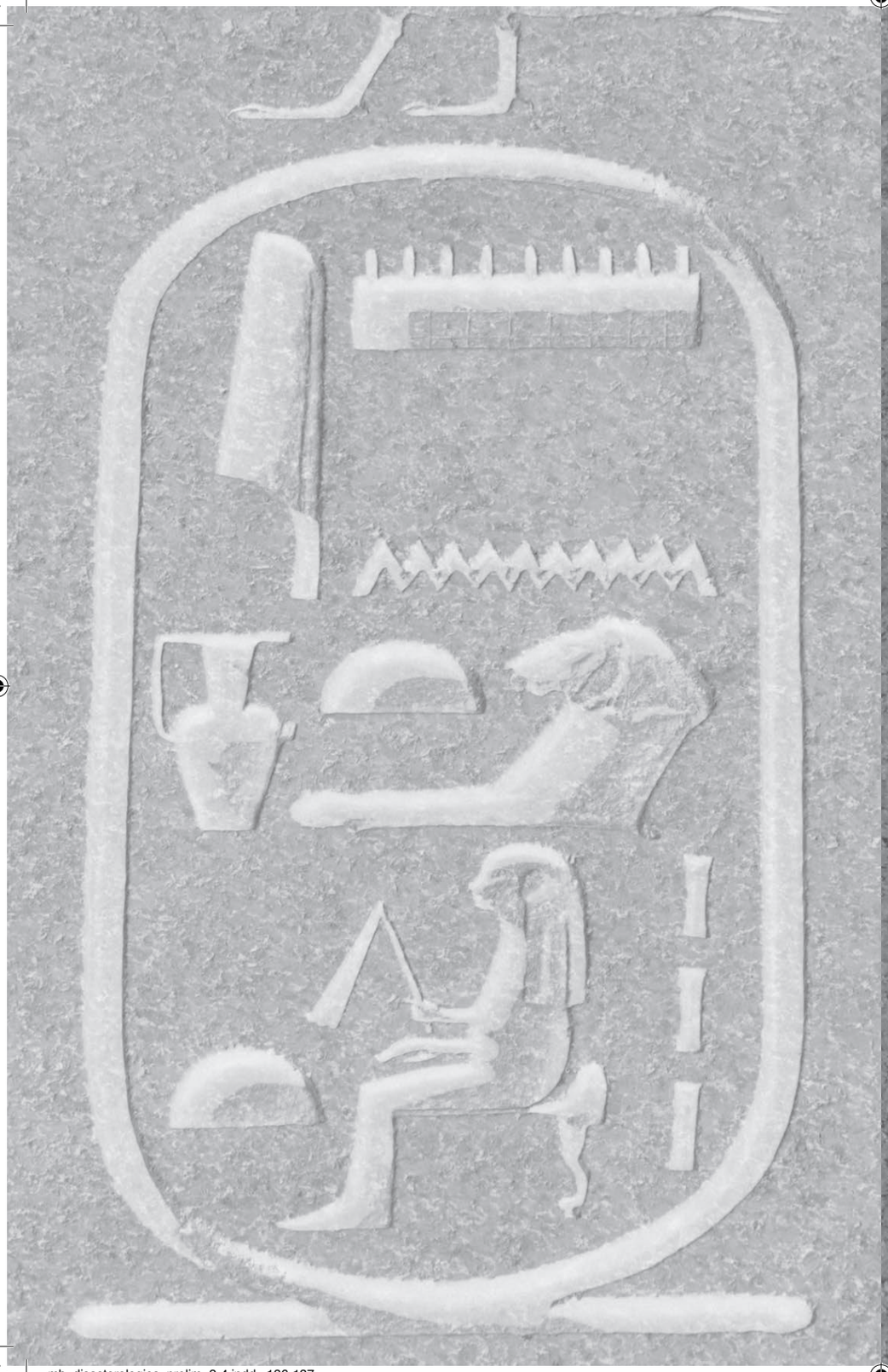
SOURCES

AB – Alain Badiou, *Ethics*
AC – Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*
AR – Arthur Rimbaud, *Le Bateau Ivre*
CM – Chris Maker, *La Jetée*
EB – Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*
FF – Franco Fortini, *I Cani del Sinai* (and Straub & Huillet, *Fortini-Cani*)
HCa – Hélène Cixous, "Elpenor's Dream"
HCb – Hart Crane, "At Melville's Tomb"
HDT – Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod*
HMa – Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*
HMb – Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses"
JFL – Jean-François Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*
KH – *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (Werner Herzog)
MB – Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*
MD – Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*
MH – Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*
MM – Marianne Moore, "The Grave"
MR – Mary Ruefle, "Someone reading a book is a sign of order in the world"
PC – Paul Celan, "From the sinking whalebrow"
RD – Robert Duncan, "My Mother Would Be A Falconress"
RS – Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in The Vicinity of Art"
RWa – Robert Walser, "Eine Art Erzählung"
RWb – Robert Walser, "Kleist in Thun"
SHa – Susan Howe, "Thorow"
SHb – Susan Howe, "Silence Wager Stories"
VB – Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film*
WGS – W G Sebald, *The Emigrants*

(Originally published in Now as a *Bird, Now as a Worm, Now as a Plant*, Hallwalls, 2012.)



mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 134-135 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



SCRIPTS

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 136-137 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

In the Form of the Letter “X”

1985



By vast pains
we mine into the pyramid

by horrible gropings
we come to the central room

with joy
we espy the sarcophagus



but we lift the lid
– and no body is there!

The old mummy lies
buried in cloth on cloth

it takes time to
unwrap this Egyptian king.



There is no body there
behind the lidded vault you open.

The crypt of your joyful sight.

Groping in horror for the centre.



You peer amid vast names
seeking mine.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 138-139 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Ithaca

2000

In the sinking whalebrow
I read you—
you recognize me,

heaven
hurls itself
into the harpoon

Ithaca

There is no way to contain you in this, all of you, all of what you were and all that you will have become by the time, if there will be such a time, when we meet again.

Instead, I can tell you that, sleeping, silently, I came to gloomy Ithaca. Precisely to Ithaca I came sleeping; me, another nobody, unrecognized by all who saw me. I came to Ithaca, that day, sleeping, to find you, and I found I didn't know where I was.





That day, the signs which lessened my discouragement, and restored my faith in something like the unseen god of cinema, seemed to multiply around me. If memory, thanks to the consolation of oblivion, offers no

bridge from itself to the present, it at least allows us to breathe a new and celestial air: new, despite the fact, and even because we've breathed it before; and the air of true paradise because it's of the one we've lost.

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices . . .

I can tell you that my fear of my own death vanished as soon as I recalled the taste of your flesh, that taste of our foundered home that has no taste, and therefore has the sharpest taste. At that moment, the nobody I had been moved outside of time, outside of action, outside of immediate enjoyment, each time the miracle of analogy made me escape from the present.





Silently, sleeping, I came ashore at Ithaca, seaspawn and seawrack, returning to a world of things that once possessed you, held you fast within their cryptic might. I didn't have to bow and scrape to enter their monarchy; there were no secret compartments within which the magic of things was locked. Whatever I gave up was never anything more than all the words that would forever fail to revive me.

No, in silent sleep I drifted home to sharptasting Ithaca, your Ithaca, in which I can find you, while losing you, in every sound and image: in the way that piece of pipe is lying there, in the water falling over rocks, in this keen yelp sundering the street. Losing you I find you in every way

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 140-141 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

some otherwise inconspicuous thing suddenly acts so that one's heart skips, and whatever was always meant seems finally to regard itself. Wet grass and cracked concrete: the true doors of the real. Portals to you.

Somehow in silence, I traveled home to here asleep, trying to think, to pull what I'd once felt out of the shadows. I had to make a leap into the not-yet-conscious, into the truth and absolution of images and sounds, toward the countenance of something still nameless. The only means of doing so was to find and found this thing. This nameless thing that emerges, as I do, again and for the first time, into the world, and will never leave it. This thing of love's black sail. This foundered foundling thing. This thing of you.





The gusts of wind were very hard and the night very dark, but our little whaleboat glided away like a thing of life.

Room

2007

This is the room of lonely facts
experience incapable of public decipherment
but he does not grasp what it all actually meant.

To astonish the old creedbound fears
unmustered by his loneliness.

They whirl asunder and dismember me
as if nothing had happened,
and the room had always
looked like that.









mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 142-143 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

O, Fortuna

2007

It's become a bit like a dream to me now, despite having so much footage, but maybe you can remember this. It was a week in early May, a few years back. We'd gone into the Algoma region, along Meakin's road for about 80 miles, then humped in up Vacher Creek to the Batchewana, to clean up your grandfolks' graves, shoot some stuff for your film, and to bury those guns. There'd been an enormous early blackfly hatch and it was buggy, so buggy we were building a fire every time we stopped walking, to stand in the smoke for respite.

(Years ago in Moosonee I met a bush pilot who told me how he once overflew a man on a hilltop who seemed to be signaling to him with long black streamers. These were really blackflies in their thousands, using the man for a windbreak while they attacked him, rising and falling in eerie concordance with his frantic arms, veiling his face with whining hungry blackness. It is usually difficult to apprehend the concept of an ocean by analogy with a single drop of water, but in the case of these unpleasant creatures, one will fall upon you with sufficient vampirish alacrity to represent the whole swarm, unlike a dewdrop which lies so docile in the palm as to seem altogether alien to riptides and shipwrecks.)

You took me on a walk about a mile and a half through the bush to that spot you thought might be good for a cabin someday. I forget the name of the lake. The woods were vibrant, vibrating. We were having a smoke and you told me a little story, a "real stinger, baby" as you'd say, just a brief thing, no more than a couple of minutes in the telling, and it moved me, I was pricked by it, but now my aging brain can't bring back any of the details. I do remembering thinking at the time that I wanted to use it in a film someday, and now the day's upon me and I find myself at a loss.

"I find myself" is an odd way of putting it, I guess, with respect to loss, to being at a loss. To being lost. Back in those days, those long ago days when you were dying, I felt lost. Foundered. Capsized. Disastered, you might say. In the etymological sense: cut off from the star that ought to guide me.

I want to say "no, don't worry, I haven't made you into my ego-ideal." But maybe I can't say that, can't know whether or not that was true. It seems that it was more like a kind of symbiosis, a mutual registration of bearing (of getting one's bearings), a reciprocal exchange, but I can't be sure. There are a number of things that would support that idea: the more or less immediate recognition so many years ago now, the talking and the scribbling, the books, the jazz, baseball and fishing, the North, the wine lore, and the cooking, all those stupefying stupendous meals.

(It's funny that sex wasn't much a part of it, given my obsessions.) All the same, I can't shake the suspicion that I was getting the better end of the stick, that perhaps I was bleeding you, vampiric. Bleeding you dry. Even in your dying, and despite my state of wreckage, I was accruing benefits,









mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 144-145 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

coming closer than I had ever been to death, your death, watching you sink from the safety of the shore, and soaking up the knowledge to be had, the macabre poetry of it. In a way, I wanted to make your death my own. I wanted to own your death.

Montaigne has a story, in the crypt of one of his essays, about a venture outdoors to get some fresh air by taking a ride on horseback. Struck from behind by "a powerful warhorse" assaulting his smaller horse at the rear, he is suddenly unsaddled, falls, strikes the ground and swoons. Taken for dead, paralyzed, unable to make the slightest sign to the people huddled around him, he is carried home by his companions. He later awakens in a somnolent state of bliss. Witnessing his own rebirth, Montaigne undergoes excruciating pain in the return to life. The softness of the narcotic sleep in which he had been bathing slowly disappears. After having regained consciousness, *his first feelings seemed much closer to death than to life.* He sums up this famous moment that will soon become the project of self-portraiture: *But for a long time afterward, and the following day, when my memory happened to jar open and represent to me the state in which I had found myself at the instant when I had glimpsed this horse barreling down on me (for I had seen it on my heels and took myself for dead, but this thought had been so sudden that fear never had leisure enough to be generated), it seemed to me that it was a bolt of lightning that struck my soul with a shock that I was returning from the other world. This tale of so slight an event is rather vain, were it not for the lesson I have drawn from it for myself, for in truth, to practice death I find that we only have to brush up against it.* He begins to fathom what in the following sentences he calls





the *thorny business, greater than it may appear, of following an allure as vagabond as our mind; to penetrate the opaque depths of its inner folds, to choose and arrest so many of its slightest variations. And it's a new and extraordinary pleasure that draws us away from the common dealings with the world.*

I guess, in this way, your death was the event against which I brushed up. I tried to practice death by brushing up against you, and found myself (that odd wording again) at a loss. Brushing up against your death, which I did not and could not own, was like brushing up against a void. Like so many twigs and leaves and brambles and branches that plague us when we're in the bush, wondering if we're lost. When it's as if the woods have folded in upon us, darkening our spirits, veiling our faces in blackness, setting us adrift.

Midway upon the journey of our life, I found that I was in a dusky wood; for the right path, whence I had strayed, was lost.

And then one day you stopped dying. It was a stunning miracle of relief. You would go on, and I could go on, and we could hump the Vacher, clean the graves, bury the guns, and I could hear the story, be stung by it, baby, and consign it to oblivion. One day, over a pig of a Duero and a nice woodland risotto, you'll tell it to me again. Do you see me now? I'm that guy on the hilltop this fine day in May. Signaling you with the long black streamers. Do you see me?





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 146-147 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

Vocables

2007

[This is an outline for an unfinished movie, part of a series of movies Mike called *Shipwreck Theory*]

Malraux writes: "If we suddenly hear a voice other than our own through our own throat, we would be terrified." His commentator, whose commentator I am, as commentator comments: "Is this even possible? It's the definition of love. As strong as redundancy because as terrible as agony."

Sometimes when I'm having difficulty understanding a book, or not making much progress getting into it, I start reading it in snatches, fragmentarily one could say, from the end back towards the beginning. It seems then, once I have an idea of what's coming, that I can retrospectively decipher preceding passages in light of where they're going.

The interesting similarity of metaphor and motif in Agamben and Lyotard's very different discussions of voice (*Language and Death*; *Soundproof Room*). Cricket (stridulation, the shriek); thrush; tetragrammaton.

(from R. Ray) When Benjamin proposed a historical method based on such images, Theodor Adorno could only reply: "Your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell."

Adorno meant to be dismissive. In fact, he had produced the perfect definition of cinema ("the crossroads of magic and positivism") and of film studies' traditional project (to "break the spell"). As a technologically based, capital-intensive medium, filmmaking quickly developed into an industry attracted by positivism's applications: the Taylorist-Fordist models of rationalized production. And yet, as Thalberg realized, the movies succeeded commercially to the extent that they *enchanted*. Hence the inevitable question: could enchantment be mass-produced? Yes, as Godard once told Colin MacCabe, "the cinema is all money," but at any moment it can also become, as Godard wrote of Renoir's *La Nuit du carrefour* (*Night at the Crossroads*), "the air of confusion... the smell of rain and of fields bathed in mist."





In his famous study of imperialist terror, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig suggests that the task of understanding "calls neither for demystification nor remystification but for a quite different poetics of destruction and revelation." Hence, "Conrad's way of dealing with the terror of the rubber boom in the Congo was *Heart of Darkness*. There were three realities there, comments Frederick Karl: King Leopold's, made out of intricate disguises and deceptions, Roger Casement's studied realism [in his official reports], and Conrad's, which, to quote Karl, 'fell midway between the other two, as he attempted to penetrate the veil and yet was anxious to retain its hallucinatory quality.' This formulation is sharp and important: *to penetrate the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality*."

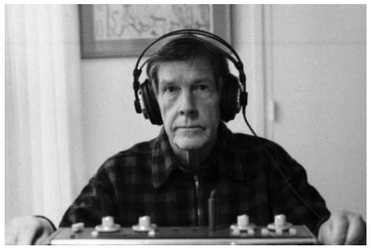
• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

The video will contain: the complete list of what you need to say when you are in exile; precise advice about the making of simple objects; a retrospective view of things that have been said; a systematic manual of poetic exercises; a memento of table manners and polite usage; a rehabilitation of hidden memory; a description of different everyday lives; an analysis of potential recurrence; observation techniques applying to people you know; a concentrate of individual sensations and their explanation; a method of one-voice dialogue; a plan to visit nature.

Rimbaud: "ghosts of the future nocturnal luxury."

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 148-149 2016-05-22 3:17 PM





Mallarmé: "We are the sad opacity of our future ghosts."

••••• ••••• ••••• •••••

Sequence:

The shot with Jazzbo at the Cincinnati zoo. Mari Boine's little a cappella piece: Ale Sat (Ikke Mer). High contrast. Step printed. Opening title sequence, but not titles: maybe the bit from Montaigne, viz.

And also for this design of mine 'tis convenient for me to write at home, in a wild country, where I have nobody to assist or relieve me; where I hardly see a man who understands the Latin of his Pater Noster, and of French as little, if not less. I might have it better elsewhere, but then the work would have been less my own; and its principal end and perfection is to be exactly mine. I readily correct an accidental error, of which I am full, as I run carelessly on; but for my ordinary and constant imperfections, it were a kind of treason to put them out. When another tells me, or that I say to myself, "Thou art too thick of figures; this is a word of Gascon growth; that is a dangerous phrase (I do not reject any of those that are used in the common streets of France: they who would fight custom with grammar are fools); this is an ignorant discourse; this is a paradoxical discourse; that is going too far; thou makest thyself too merry at times: men will think thou sayest a thing in good earnest which thou only speakest in jest." "Yes," say I, "but I correct the

faults of inadvertence, not those of custom. Do I not talk at the same rate throughout? Do I not represent myself to the life? 'Tis enough that I have done what I designed; all the world knows me in my book, and my book in me."

And then Derrida:
This, then, will not have been a book . . .
And finally the title of the film: *Vocables*

Then at some later point, the same clip, now high contrast, with sound, with a voice-over commentary. Repetition of the clip, now silent, little bits repeated, slowed down, etc.

In the summer during which you were three and a half, your daddy took you from Mobile to Buffalo, and later to Temagami. On the second day of the journey you stopped to visit the Cincinnati zoo. In the bug house you saw an exhibit of roaches; hundreds of roaches, palmetto bugs, crawling all over each other behind a glass. You must have been afraid that your daddy was taking you away forever. When you saw the roaches (perhaps they reminded you of your house in Mobile) you burst into tears, and sobbed uncontrollably that you wanted to go home, to go back to Mobile, to see your mummy, that you didn't want to go to Buffalo. You were inconsolable. All your daddy could do was hold you in his arms and let you cry. It took nearly half an hour before you were finished. A boy came by and asked "what's wrong with him?"





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 150-151 2016-05-22 3:17 PM

This footage you are watching was shot very shortly after you left the bug house. Can you see the strain in your face? Do you have any memory of the event at all? However old you are now, however well you remember what happened, you can be sure that the little boy in the pictures you are looking at doesn't exist anymore.

Except here.

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

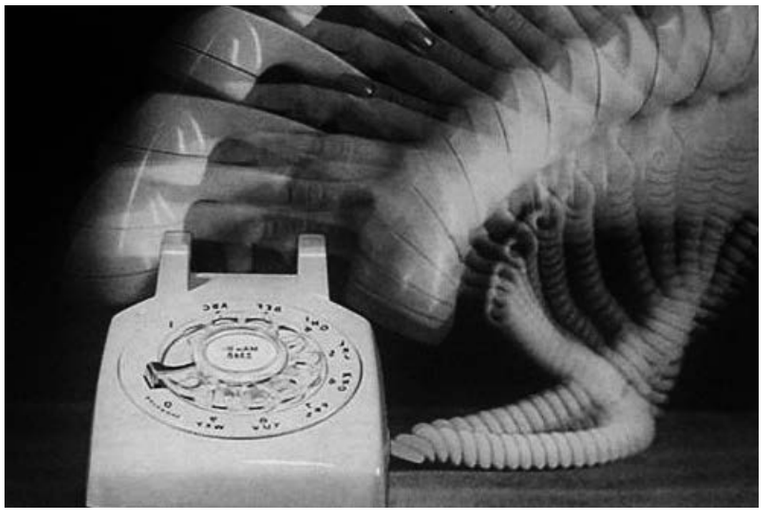
the voice and death (Agamben, Lyotard)

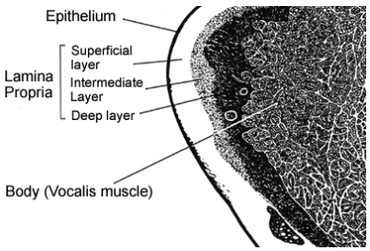
the voice and god (Moses, amid lightnings, on Sinai's mountaintop)

the next voice you hear (James Whitmore, Nancy Davis/Reagan)

stuttering (Neil, Susan, Billy Budd, Tarkovsky)

talk dirty to me (the invocatory drive, phone sex)







mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 152-153 2016-05-22 3:17 PM



FILMS + VIDEOS

BIO

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 154-155 2016-05-22 3:18 PM

Films and Videos

AT A STANDSTILL, BUT NOT WITHOUT HOPE

Drowned, They Said, On the Batchawana (video with Michael Nelson)
Quartet (video)
Starker (video)

NOT AVAILABLE FOR SCREENING

Narratives of Egypt (4-part film series) (1984-87)
Prologue: Infinite Obscure (16mm, 1984) 20 min
In the Form of the Letter X (16mm, 1985) 5 min
Cartouche (16mm, 1985) 8 min
Farrago (16mm, 1987) fragments (unfinished)
I Built a Cottage For Susan and Myself (video, 1993) 11 min
Ithaka (video, 2001) 17 min
Ithaca (video, 2000) 11 min

Shipwreck Theory I (*The Reading*) (video series) work-in-progress
Clay Shards Bind Clay (video, 2004) 8 min
Blin (video, 2005) 33 min
Art by Riven (video, 2007) 9 min (lost)

Shipwreck Theory II (*The Writing*) (video series) work-in-progress
The Science of Singularity (video, 2004) 8 min
What Talking Means (video, 2006) 7 min
O, Fortuna (video, 2007) 14 min
Epistolary (video) 20 min (unfinished or lost)

UNRELEASED MOVIES

Shipwreck Theory III (*The Knowing*) (video series) work-in-progress
Ida Lupino (video) fragments
Tohu Wabohu (video) fragments
Room (video, 2007) 5 min
Thick Bone Like Katanga (video) fragments
Western (video) fragments

Shipwreck Theory IV (*The Meaning*) (video series) work-in-progress
Kletis (video) fragments
Vocables (video) fragments

Non-Compatibles (video, 2002) 57 min
Diary of Kitty Lo (video, 1987) 25 min (with Jill Glessing)

JUVENALIA

Reservoir (16mm, 1983) 6 min
Read Memory Entire (S8mm, 1982) 11 min
Check Theory Girls Enticed (S8mm, 1982) 6 min
Woman Water Huron Goodbye (S8mm, 1981) 11 min
Katus Interruptus (16mm, 1980) 4 min

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 156-157 2016-05-22 3:18 PM

Bio

Mike Cartmell passed away in Ithaca, NY on February 5, 2014, age 61. Mourned by his sons Sam Cartmell and Finn Jazzbo Cartmell and by his partner Sandra Kelley. Filmmaker, Photographer, Craftsman, Writer, Chef, Wine-lover, Musician, Baseball Fan. Brother of Deborah Cartmell (Ian Bradley), uncle of Hester and Jake Bradley. Predeceased by parents, Roy Cartmell and Jayne Cartmell (nee Chilman). Also deeply saddened by Mike's death is a wide circle of friends who will miss his sharp intellect, encyclopedic knowledge, hilarious mimicry, sardonic humour, brilliant cooking, emotional support in times of need, intense conversation, gruff disposition, eclectic taste. Special thanks to the staff of the Cayuga Medical Center Oncology Unit for their compassionate care. Donations in Mike's name may be directed to the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (cfmdc.org).

• • • • •

"Mike Cartmell, from Hamilton, Ontario, began making Super 8 films in 1973 with his own equipment. He studied philosophy and politics at the University of Toronto 1971-1976, and cultural studies at the State University of New York, Buffalo, 1976-1979. In 1979 he began shooting and exhibiting photography, and became more serious about his filmmaking. He programmed Zone Cinema in Hamilton from 1981 to 1984, then moved to Toronto and joined the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and the Funnel." —John Porter, *Cache du Cinema Notes*

Mike Cartmell filmmaker statement (winter 1987-88)

My work as a filmmaker is pitched on a terrain demarcated by history (personal and communal), sexuality, and language. Uncertainties surrounding my own origin due to foundlinghood and adoption led to a fascination with ancestry, genealogy, descent. My filmmaking is concerned with the issue of its/my parentage, and often finds itself up against the problematic of origin/originality: this has much to do with the modes of adaptation I've investigated in some of my films, and with the ongoing interest in proper names.

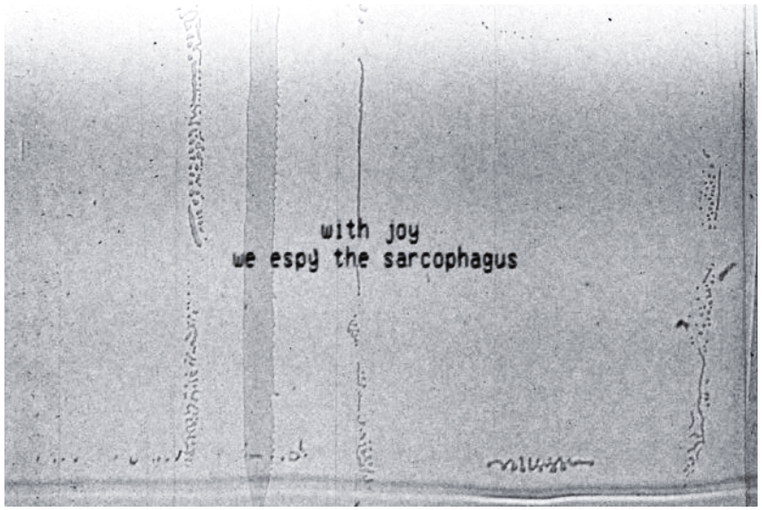
I come to filmmaking from a cultural studies/critical theory background and so, not surprisingly, I'm very interested in the issue of the relation(s) between the theoretical and the productive in artmaking. This seems to me a crucial question for contemporary culture (for "post-modernism" if you will), and however difficult and contradictory the fit(s) found between the two, the articulation of theory and practice remains a site of profound exhilaration and challenge.

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 158-159 2016-05-22 3:18 PM





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 160-161 2016-05-22 3:18 PM





mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 162-163 2016-05-22 3:18 PM



mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 164-165 2016-05-22 3:18 PM

disasterologies

ESSAYS

BY MIKE CARTMELL

mh_disasterologies_prelim_2-4.indd 166 2016-05-22 3:18 PM